

# REMBRANDT



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PORTRAIT OF REMBRANDT (1648)

# REMBRANDT

A CRITICAL ESSAY

BY

AUGUSTE BRÉAL



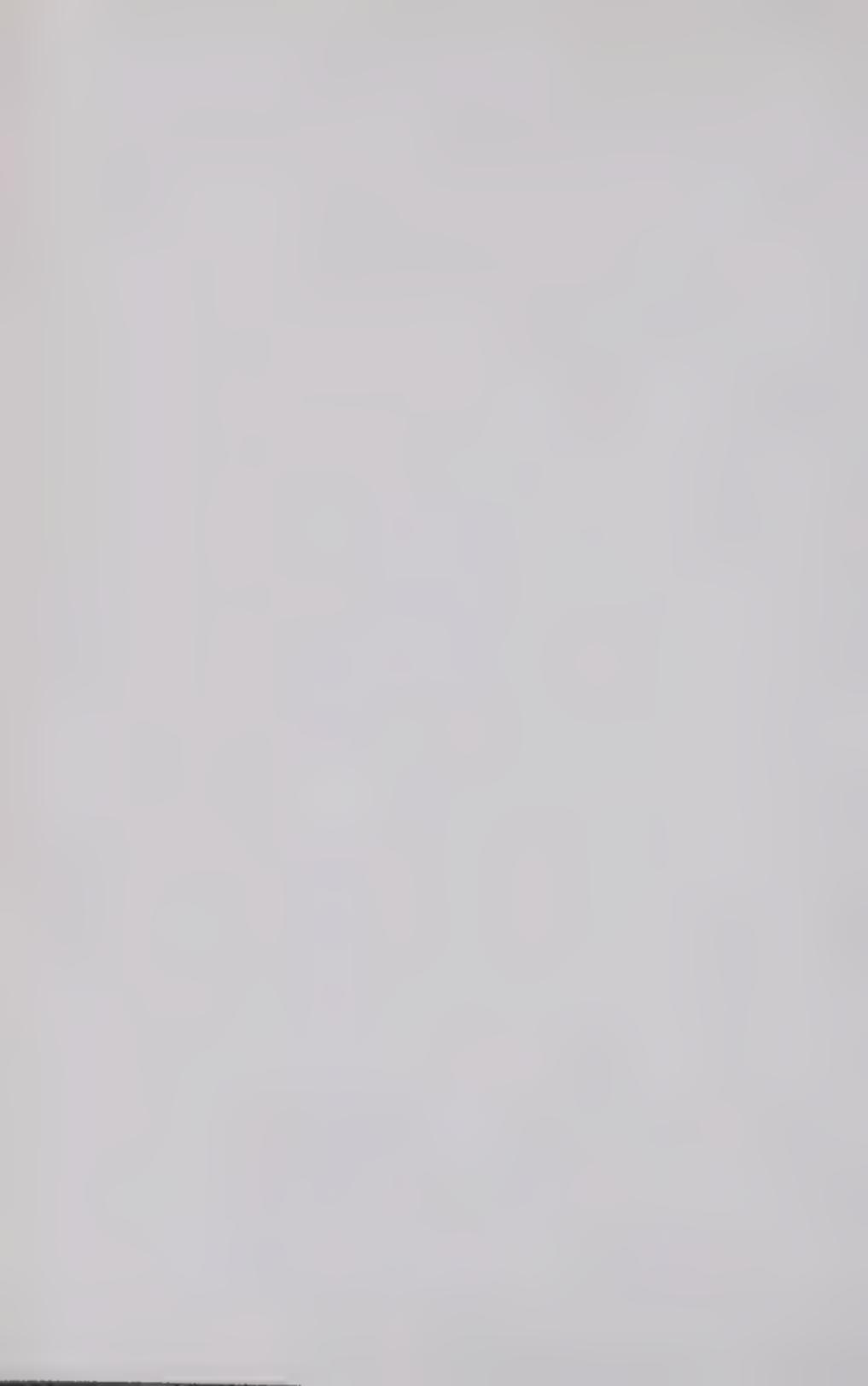
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To  
SIMON BUSSY  
TO THE FRIEND AND TO THE PAINTER  
IN REMEMBRANCE OF  
THE GOOD HOURS SPENT  
WITH REMBRANDT

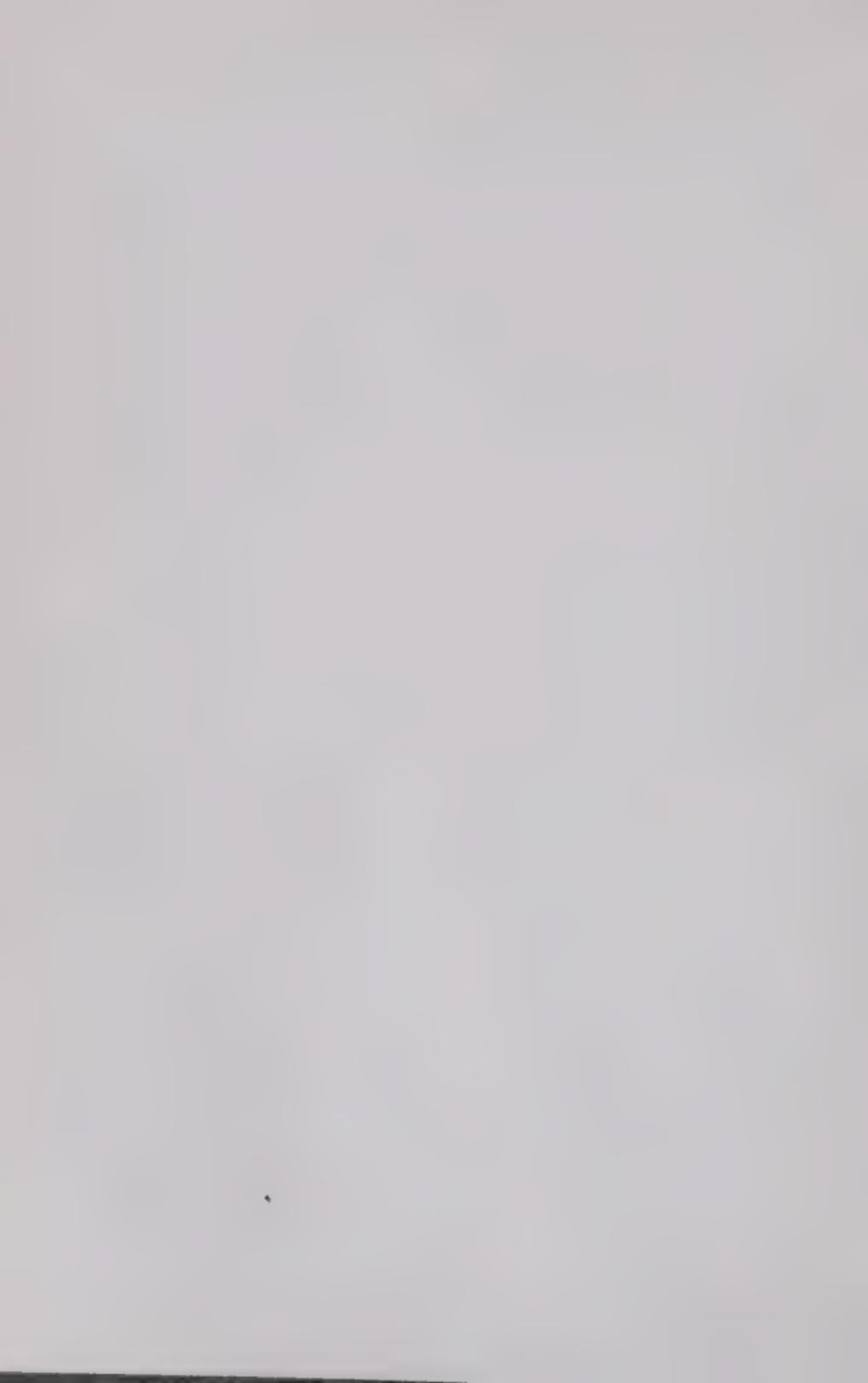
*Limpsfield, February 1902.*



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

My thanks are due to Miss Clementina Black for her excellent translation of my French text.

AUGUSTE BRÉAL.



## INTRODUCTION

MUCH has been written about Rembrandt. There are numbers of books dealing with his life, his works, his art and his period. Some of his pictures — the *Night Watch* for example — would afford material for a whole bibliography. He has been studied in detail as a painter, a draughtsman and an engraver. The principal points in the history of his life have been gradually established upon a basis of authentic documents. We can make no claim of adducing in these pages anything new in regard to the facts of his life. Almost all the biographical details of which we shall have occasion to speak are drawn from Emile Michel's very full work on the subject.<sup>1</sup> This essay will contain no discussion of texts, no

<sup>1</sup> "Rembrandt, sa vie, son œuvre et son temps," par Emile Michel, Membre de l'Institut. Paris : Hachette, 1893.

## INTRODUCTION

enquiries into the greater or less authenticity of this or that engraving, no enumeration of Rembrandt's works. Several of his most celebrated pictures will not even be mentioned in it. Still less will it contain general theories of what painting ought or ought not to be. Nor shall we endeavour to derive any system of ethics from a contemplation of Rembrandt's works considered "in the abstract."

There exists a certain German book,<sup>1</sup> at present in its forty-fifth edition, which one may read without discovering precisely whether Rembrandt was a general, a statesman, a sailor or an artist. The one definite piece of information imparted by this work is that Rembrandt was a German who in many ways conspicuously resembled Bismarck. Incidentally, the reader also learns that Rembrandt's favourite colours were black, red and gold, the colours of the German standard. Aspects of such elevation as this do not fall within our scope. To us Rembrandt is a Dutchman of the seventeenth century, an artist, a painter and engraver.

<sup>1</sup> "Rembrandt als Erzieher von einem Deutschen," Leipzig : Hirschfeld.



REMBRANDT AND SASKIA (1636)

## INTRODUCTION

We have seen and studied the works of Rembrandt in the principal galleries and great collections of Europe. We have loved them and tried to understand them. By degrees an idea has taken shape within us of the man who conceived and the artist who created them. As our knowledge grew and as we went on comparing Rembrandt's works with one another, and considering their relation to the works of other artists our idea of the master grew more and more living, until the name of Rembrandt came at last to call up a being of incomparable originality and power, a spirit that breathed inquiry and had the gift of putting into its smallest manifestation some spark of its own ardent life. Of this indefatigable workman, this creator full at once of genius and of learning, this ever-wakeful artist it is that we have attempted to speak. We have taken care to avoid excessive description of pictures—a dangerous transposition of arts. What we have to say has been illustrated as far as possible by reproductions of drawings and engravings, and the examples given have been chosen from the collections in the British Museum, where the originals can easily

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be inspected. On account of the size of this volume we have abstained from reproducing any picture; in the case of Rembrandt, more perhaps than in that of any other artist, small reproductions of this nature would be truly a betrayal.

In our day, thanks to the increased perfection of photography, everybody knows Rembrandt and has an opinion about him. Our aim is not to make readers know him, still less to make them judge him: we wish to make them love him. If this little book should induce some reader to revisit a gallery, or to turn over once more some collection of etchings, bringing to the contemplation of these things attentive eyes, a fresh mind free from preconceived formulas, and the power of feeling emotion; if, in short, we could help to get Rembrandt's work looked at in some degree as Rembrandt knew how to look at a shell, a tree, an old woman or the veiled line of the horizon, our end will have been attained.



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# I

Rembrandt's creative activity—His whole life consecrated to his work—Circumstances amid which he was born—His family and the portraits that he has left of its members—Characteristics common to all Rembrandt's works, and in particular to his portraits—Leyden, the Dutch landscape and Rembrandt's childhood.

WHEN Rembrandt's works were exhibited in Amsterdam in 1898, the way out led through a little room entirely hung with photographs, amid which the visitor who had just been looking upon so many masterpieces, felt very little temptation to linger. Yet these photographs represented something as wonderful in its own way as the most beautiful of pictures: the sum, namely, of a life of extraordinary labour, the visible catalogue of an unbroken series of creations, a sort of palpable and overwhelming enumeration; for these were photographs of nearly all Rembrandt's known pictures, to the number of about four hundred and fifty. If

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to this list we add the two hundred and sixty to two hundred and seventy etchings and nearly nine hundred drawings and sketches existing at the present time in various collections, we shall begin to be able to form a notion of that unintermittent activity and of that passion for translating life into its image by which Rembrandt was animated.

More perhaps than any other man he tells his history in his works, for they contain his whole self. His whole existence was but one passionate and ceaseless perception, driving him irresistibly to seek some outward expression and to hold fast in form, in colour, in the creation of images, some small part of the mysterious life that glowed within him. He remained, so to speak, exterior to the events of his time. In the beginning of his career, as in the days of his glory, and as in the days when he was forgotten of all, he never failed to turn upon the world that clear-seeing yet dreaming eye, that gaze of the "seer," that singular aspect of which he was pleased so often to portray.

No one who considers Rembrandt's work as

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a whole can continue to wonder that he was "absent" from the world of honours and titles, and solid fortune and advantageous connections. He was elsewhere. He tells us where he was, and his works invite us to follow him. A contemporary records that he once said : "When I desire to rest my mind, I do not seek honours but liberty." Liberty in its most precious shape, liberty to feel, to think, to dream, to be moved, that inner liberty which can never be taken from him who knows how to defend it, Rembrandt loved with a jealous love, his life long. The fifteen-year-old-scholar who failed to keep his terms at the University of Leyden, and the man of sixty-three, worn out before his time, whose death is noted in the registers of the Westerkerk, are one and the same mind, a mind from which the whole outer world is reflected, transposed and illuminated by a special light. Rembrandt gave himself up, body and soul, to the task of revealing his own inner world. For those who can follow and understand him he reserves one of the rarest possible delights, one of the deepest possible emotions—the sense of penetrating a chosen nature.

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Doubtless Rembrandt felt the superiority of his genius: the care which he—a man so simple in matters of everyday life—took to avoid being disturbed in his work is a proof of it. “When he was painting,” says one of his pupils, “he would have refused to receive the greatest sovereign on earth and would have compelled him to wait or to call again when he was willing to see him.”<sup>1</sup> In all circumstances and amid whatever hindrances and difficulties Rembrandt retained this diligent respect for his art and this devotion to his work. His life may be summed up in two words: to feel and to express. If it be true that genius consists not in seeing *more* than others, but in seeing *differently* from others, that is to say in perceiving relations not perceived by the ordinary mind, and in rendering these relations perceptible to humanity at large (and we believe that genius is nothing else but this) then Rembrandt of all men is an artist of genius. Before making our way into the world which he reveals to us it may

<sup>1</sup> Recorded by Filippo Baldinucci: “Cominciamento e progresso dell’arte dell’ intagliare in rame,” Florence, 1686.



LANDSCAPE

PEN AND WASH DRAWING

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be interesting to consider the circumstances wherein he was born and amid which he developed.

Rembrandt was born at Leyden in 1605. He was the fifth child of a miller named Harmen Gerritsz, who had married the daughter of a Leyden baker. Harmen Gerritsz seems to have belonged to the lesser *bourgeoisie*, to have been fairly well off and to have had some education. He is known to have been chosen several times by his fellow townsmen as "chief of the parish, in the Pelican district," and his will, which is extant, shows him to have owned a mill, several houses, and some gardens outside the town. Plate, jewels, linen and commodities of various kinds are also mentioned in the will. The document bears the signature of Harmen *Van Ryn* (of the Rhine). The same designation, which recalls the position occupied by the mill of Rembrandt's father at the junction of the two branches of the Rhine, was adopted by Rembrandt in his early work. Several of his youthful productions are signed with his monogram followed by the words *Van Ryn*. Let us add that M. Bredius and M. de Roever inform us, through

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the pages of “Oud-Holland,”<sup>1</sup> that Rembrandt’s father was the owner of a grave near the pulpit in the church of St Peter. These details have an interest beyond that of mere historic fact, for the father of Rembrandt is no stranger to us: he lives in his son’s work. Every connoisseur of prints knows his characteristic face with its fiery, ferretty eyes, beaked nose and bald head, now bare, now covered with an indoor cap, now again crowned according to the artist’s fancy by some eccentric eastern head-gear or by a military cap and large feather. Once seen, the questioning gaze and mouth slightly compressed by a habit of attention —a mouth like Rembrandt’s own in old age —are not easily forgotten.

The portraits of Rembrandt’s mother are even more numerous. We see her as her son was accustomed to see her: clean, grave, careful, a handkerchief tied over her cap, her large Bible on her knees or close at hand, such as she must have appeared when she paused a moment from her household labours, or when she gave his first lessons in Scripture

<sup>1</sup> “Oud-Holland,” periodical magazine. Amsterdam, 1882.

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History to the little Rembrandt. Her hands, small and wrinkled, are laid on the book or folded over each other; her whole personality breathes a simplicity not devoid of good humour but capable, it may be guessed, of becoming severe on occasion. We feel that from childhood up the painter had known the way in which this mouth, fallen in a little over toothless jaws, would open, the way in which the lines of the cheek looking like wrinkles in a pippin would widen for a smile or purse up for a reproof. A portrait of Rembrandt's mother, in the Ryks Museum at Amsterdam, painted probably when the young man was some twenty-two or twenty-three years old, displays a degree of respectful attention and care which perhaps stood a little in the way of the young artist's success. The workmanship is careful and a trifle awkward. We feel that Rembrandt wished to render with scrupulous exactitude the image of the parent whom some years later he was to portray repeatedly in the garb of a widow. An etching reproduced on p. 13 shows Rembrandt's mother wearing a scarf over her head in the fashion adopted



REMBRANDT'S MOTHER (1628)

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by some Jewish women, and clothed in a fur jacket which the painter often painted.

By many portraits too, both painted and engraved, we are made acquainted with Rembrandt's brother and with his sister Lysbeth van Ryn. Of these portraits may already be said what is true of all Rembrandt's portraits: they show us a living person; they make us acquainted with "somebody." They exist. So fully do they exist that in an exhibition where portraits by Rembrandt are hung, the walls seem more alive than the visitors. "Look at them," says Fromentin, speaking of Rembrandt's pictures,<sup>1</sup> "look at them as Rembrandt meant us to look at his human effigies, attentively and long, with your eyes upon their lips and gazing into theirs." The advice is superfluous; their gaze takes possession of our eyes, and we find ourselves almost involuntarily questioning their mouths. Certain portraits of his are something more than silent human presences, something more than people not speaking, they are disquieting

<sup>1</sup> Eugène Fromentin. "Les maîtres d'autrefois." Paris: Plon-Nourrit.

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riddles. Rembrandt everywhere brings out the hidden things and the things that even if visible must be guessed to be understood. One such portrait of his sister (in M. Jacquemart's collection) is transparent, calm, full of an intimacy truly "fraternal"—no other word renders so well the quiet charm of the tenderly painted face. Every feature of the model was familiar to the artist. Lysbeth van Ryn is painted in profile; she is gentle, almost smiling; a blue ribbon (one of Rembrandt's rare notes of blue) brightens her fair colouring and her charmingly simple face. In another front face of Lysbeth, painted a year later, we find the same person, yet spectators who consider only the features of a face would never identify this later portrait with the profile mentioned above; the colour of the hair is not the same, nor the mouth, nor the nose and so on. If we compared a third portrait of Lysbeth, which is at Milan, we should find still more external differences. The same is the case with the portraits of Saskia, Rembrandt's wife; she is always the same woman; those who have eyes to see can have no hesitation in recognising her im-

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mediately. Yet none of these portraits is "a likeness," if by a likeness is meant a more or less photographic reproduction. The innumerable portraits of Rembrandt by himself have each a different "face"—they are not likenesses: they are more like than life. When once Rembrandt had seen what he wanted to paint, when he had conceived what he wanted to express, when he had been struck by a certain side of the character that he desired to render, he sacrificed everything else to that. This explains why several of the artist's contemporaries were dissatisfied with their portraits. That they should have been so is by no means surprising. Rembrandt saw them as no one else saw them, and as they did not see themselves. He painted them faithfully—in his own way. His manner of observing creates a new being. The portraits left by him give us the feeling of knowing the father, the mother, the brother and the sister of the artist. We do know them indeed, if we look at them in the right way, but not with the knowledge we might have gained from being in their company while they were alive. The light in which



REMBRANDT'S MOTHER (1631)

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we behold them is quite other than that in which they were seen by the worthy Hollanders who came to buy flour at the father's mill. A genius stands between them and us . . . the most individual, the most unexpected, the most powerful of all geniuses. In his own intense fire he reveals to us the world which he sees and to which he has imparted life, but he transfigures that on which he throws his light. Doubtless we too, like Rembrandt, create the images which we perceive. Each of us beholds a world differing from that of his neighbour; but the representations left us by Rembrandt are so living that we almost seem to perceive at first hand what we really perceive only through him as an intermediary, and believe ourselves to see as he does; but no doubt we should be a little surprised if we could see in flesh and blood the Dutch burghers and their wives whom Rembrandt has animated by the vital spell of his paintings and etchings. As far as his parents are concerned we may say that Rembrandt returned them the life which he had received from them, that he gave them a new birth and created them afresh as he

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did everything he saw. He has made the world in which he lived present for ever to all who can look upon his works.

We should hardly need precise contemporary evidence to make us sure that Rembrandt was not a very assiduous scholar at the University of Leyden. Leyden, at the time of Rembrandt's birth, was beginning to revive and to resume that fruitful activity which had been interrupted by a long period of war, and especially by the siege which the town had undergone at the hands of the Spaniards in 1573-1574. Having come victoriously through their terrible trials the inhabitants set to work with renewed ardour, reorganising all their commercial enterprises, and applying their attention to all those social, scientific, literary and artistic institutions wherein the people of Holland have always displayed both the calm productivity and the liberal practical intelligence that characterise their genius. The University of Leyden could reckon, among its professors, the most distinguished men of the era : Scaliger, Justus Lipsius, Vossius, Saumaise, Heinsius, Arminius, Gomarus, and many others were drawing together students of every kind.

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The parents of Rembrandt, desirous of giving their son a good education, put down his name for the Latin literature classes at the University. But the young scholar does not seem to have profited much by the course. Before entering the University he had learned to write his own language pretty correctly, and had in some degree studied calligraphy, which was regarded at that time as an art. The lines of his writing which have been preserved, as well as the signatures of his works, sometimes very clear, show that these lessons of his childhood had not been useless, but there is every reason to believe that Rembrandt had no great taste for learning or for reading. The inventory of his possessions in later life includes but very few books; and we may well believe that young Rembrandt, with his gift of vision, his taste for meditation and the passion which he always had for liberty, would find it difficult to betake himself to his classes without playing truant. The street life must have laid hold upon him before he had gone many steps from his own door. Busy traders, housewives at their marketing, beggars trailing from door to door, the noisy transit of a group

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of armed city guards with children running round them, all these things must have busied his eyes and remained fixed in his mind. . . .

Many a time, no doubt, his sauntering, half-unconscious walks must have brought him to the city gates and out into the country, flat under the sky. The horizon is low but very distant, lines of canals interlace, stretch into the distance and vanish into the golden haze where windmills are turning. The immense sky is full of movement, the clouds fly before the wind and the landscape changes as they pass; far away the sails of a vessel catch the sun and glitter strangely above the yellowish water. Farther away still begins the sea-shore, the grass upon the undulating sandbanks becomes scantier and scantier, tufts of reeds bow before the wind, and, on the leaden sea, sloops come running aslant before the strong gale that sweeps the country from end to end. Then he turns back toward the town lying minute in the distance and bristling with steeples; towards the mass of the old Burg enwrapped in mist, the river meandering amid the sand, and his father's house on the western rampart,

## REMBRANDT

by the White Gate, whose two Gothic towers are rosy in the setting sun. All these things are recorded in the artist's work. For him no teaching equalled that of this strange country at once luminous and misty, in which the sky dominates everything, seems to pervade everything, sometimes comes down and drags upon the land, where the distance of objects is indicated by the most delicate and fugitive differences of values. In that school Rembrandt learned to indicate a whole vast landscape between a couple of lines drawn near together at the foot of a sketch. There it was that, with a truth and an unexpectedness of action only to be matched in certain Japanese sketches, he noted down passing gestures amid passing things. It is pleasant to imagine the dreamy child, of an evening when the house was all shut up and his mother sat sewing in the lamp-lighted circle of the table, watching from his dark corner the fugitive lights thrown by an opening door and the great shadows moving on the walls, while coloured by the hour and by his fancy, through his mind floated the day's remembrances and images—the material of his future work.



REMBRANDT'S MOTHER (1632)

## II

Rembrandt's beginnings—His first masters—Jacob van Swanenburgh and Pieter Lastman—Influence of Lastman—Rembrandt's first works—Inequality of his genius—Rembrandt not a painter solely of masterpieces—Questions of authenticity; difficulty of deciding them—Rembrandt *a priori*, or Rembrandt according to his works—Portraits of Rembrandt by himself.

THE desire to paint which was natural to Rembrandt and which grew more and more imperious, may have been strengthened in his early days by seeing various pictures that adorned the Town Hall of Leyden. Paintings by Cornelis Engelbrechsz and Lucas van Leyden, on which the eyes of young Rembrandt must often have been fixed, are still to be seen there at the present day. The reputation of Lucas stood very high. People talked of his success and his fortune and of the lordly way in which, towards the close of his career, he lived. Albert Dürer, in the journal which he kept of his journey into the



BEGGAR STANDING  
PEN AND WASH DRAWING

## REMBRANDT

Netherlands, testifies to the esteem in which Lucas was held, the honours paid to him, and the imposing character of the procession that accompanied him when the two artists met. Van Mander records that "mighty monarchs had made proposals for the acquisition of Lucas van Leyden's *Last Judgment* which is in the Town Hall, but their offers were politely declined by the Magistrate who did not wish to part with so glorious a production of his fellow-townsman." In our opinion considerations of this order, prospects of success and celebrity, are not likely to have had great influence upon the vocation of Rembrandt, who may, however, not have been insensible to them. But the fame attained by these two compatriots of his must have helped Rembrandt's parents to resolve upon allowing their son to follow the pursuit that attracted him. When he was about fifteen years old it was decided to withdraw him from the Latin school and put him into the hands of a master painter.

There was no great range of choice in Leyden, and the young Rembrandt was put as an apprentice under Jacob van Swanenburgh, a mediocre painter, who, like most artists of

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BEGGAR ON CRUTCHES  
PEN DRAWING

## REMBRANDT

the period, had made a long stay in Italy, where, indeed, he had taken a wife. Though the young man did not receive from his first master any very distinguished teaching, he apparently received very kindly treatment. Swanenburgh mixed in the best society of Leyden, behaved well to his pupils and did not make high profits on their work, as was the practice at that time of many teachers. Rembrandt astonished everybody by the rapidity of his progress, his master foretold a brilliant future for him and soon perceived that he could teach his pupil nothing more. At the end of the three years of apprenticeship generally fixed by the rules of the guilds, Rembrandt, anxious to find a master under whom he could further perfect himself, decided to leave his family and his native town in order to learn from a painter then very much in vogue, Pieter Lastman, at Amsterdam.

Like Swanenburgh, Lastman had been an "Italianiser." Several historians have thought they discovered, in some of Lastman's works, attempts at "chiaroscuro" which they suppose to have affected his illustrious pupil and to have helped in guiding his steps to that path



PEASANT IN RAGS (ABOUT 1630)

## REMBRANDT

along which he advanced so far. We will not dispute the point, but will merely remark that the famous "chiaroscuro" that is always coupled with Rembrandt's name was not his sole preoccupation, nor even the predominant characteristic in many of his early works. It is probable that the teaching of Rembrandt's new master was authoritative and minute. Lastman seems to have been a meticulous person with a very artificial taste. Furthermore the apprentices lived at that time under a semi-domestic régime not likely to accord with the fundamental independence of Rembrandt's disposition. Certain it is that at the end of six months, and at some time in the year 1624, Rembrandt returned to Leyden, preferring, says Orlers,<sup>1</sup> "to study and practise painting alone and according to his own mind." The short stay made with Lastman did not, however, entirely fail of influencing him. He brought back from Amsterdam an odd taste for compositions overloaded with detail, for "Turqueries" and other more or less eastern disguises, which were reckoned "picturesque."

<sup>1</sup> J. J. Orlers. "*Beschryving der Stad Leiden*," 1 vol. Leyden, 1641.



BEGGAR SEATED (1630)

## REMBRANDT

This taste clung to him during a great part of his life. He is known to have possessed among his collections two sketch-books of Lastman's. It was probably in these that he met with pseudo-oriental arrangements and miscellaneous trappings such as disguise his father, his mother, himself, and several of the people in his earlier works.

The earliest works with which we are acquainted bear the date of 1627. These already display qualities of sincerity and large execution as well as a remarkable power of expression, but they are far from being the masterpieces as which some enthusiasts have wished to regard them. At this point we cannot refrain from saying that some reaction seems desirable against the tendency, existing among some of Rembrandt's admirers, to believe that the master produced none but masterpieces. When paintings or engravings of Rembrandt are under discussion, we often meet a line of argument which may be summed up thus: "Works attributed to Rembrandt which we do not find to be admirable are not Rembrandt's." But why not? "Because Rembrandt only produced admirable works.

## REMBRANDT

. . ." The reasoning is irresistible. We, however, remain rebellious. To us Rembrandt is far from being in the nature of a demi-god, a kind of "over-man." He is something much more comprehensible and therefore more interesting: a man. Never was anyone more human than this genius; everything in him is humanity and sincerity: it would be strange if he had known no fumblings and no errors. If we were to judge by certain collections—by the Rembrandts in the Louvre, for instance—one might indeed imagine that whenever the painter took up his brushes he produced a great work; but a fuller acquaintance with Rembrandt and more intimate examination of his work modifies this opinion. We learn to see the man at closer quarters and to comprehend the artist's manner of working, and we love him more as we understand him better. Rembrandt loses nothing of his mastery, but he does not appear to us in the least infallible, as he was too human not to be often in error, he was too eager in his attempts not to fail at times, too much intent on his work not sometimes to spoil it.

There are some of his etchings, of which



REMBRANDT AS A YOUNG MAN  
WASH DRAWING

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the early "proofs," the first lines traced upon the plate are much more interesting than the



REMBRANDT WITH OPEN MOUTH (1630)

completed print. The work foreshadowed by the sketch is finer than that given to us.

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Some persons conclude that the rough draught is Rembrandt's and that the plate was finished by a pupil. This may be so, in some cases probably was so; but how are we to know? Whence do these infallible judges derive the assurance that their verdicts are correct? The authenticity of that famous etching *The Raising of Lazarus*, for instance, is much disputed. It is possible that the plate may not be Rembrandt's, but those who rest their adverse opinion upon the "bad taste" and the "clumsiness" with which certain accessories are arranged, seem to us strangely positive. Was Rembrandt never clumsy, never unskilful, never theatrical? Why, certain works of his, which nobody contests, are so clumsy in composition, so heavy in execution and so exaggerated in gesture as to approach the grotesque. This method of etching, that "handling," are declared to be not the method nor the handling of Rembrandt? Can we pretend to know *how* Rembrandt would have treated such or such a subject, in what way he would have attacked this or that interpretation, when we doubt whether he himself did always know beforehand? Does

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the date of a work supply a basis upon which it is possible to establish the precise manner in which a work would have been executed? Yes, if what we mean is, that the artist in his early days would have been incapable of displaying the mastery that belongs to the man of fully ripened powers; no, if what we mean is that the master could not, in the full expansion of his genius, have produced works that were laboured, clumsy or theatrical. How is it possible with any certainty to assign *manners* to a genius at once so full of knowledge and so fresh, so piercing, so open eyed in the presence of nature, endowed with so constant a renewal of youth? In him there is no formula. He renews himself in every work and has no other care than that of rendering visible what he feels to be. He pursues this aim by any and every method, and when he touches it he stops; this is the explanation of those "changes of manner" which we shall often remark in the same painting or the same etching.

To say this, however, is not to say that we must accept as Rembrandt's everything that is made to pass under his name. Etchings

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that should never have been attributed to him have long passed for works of his, and many galleries exhibit canvases of which only the



REMBRANDT WITH A FUR CAP (1630)

name in the catalogue belongs to Rembrandt. Often nothing but an acquaintance with Rembrandt, so to say, on the moral rather than

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the material side, could enable us to distinguish between the true and the false. Judgments that repose upon feeling alone are always dangerous ; they must not be trusted too far ; but there are cases, in dealing with Rembrandt, where no others are possible. We have said already, and shall see later on, that his *technique* was always undergoing modification, and that at his highest point of development he would sometimes go back to the ways of a beginner.

We shall endeavour in the course of this essay to impart an appreciation of the unique and constant element in all Rembrandt's works ; a knowledge of the qualities which are especially those of the master leads us quickly and irresistibly to reject certain apocryphal works. As to those that are doubtful, why need people who love works of art for their own sakes and not for the sake of critical attributions, concern themselves so much —as they seem increasingly to do—about accepting or rejecting them ? The name of the author does not make a work better or worse. Persons who have paid a high price for a false Rembrandt and who greatly admire it have exactly what they deserve and are

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neither to be blamed nor pitied. That branch of criticism which deals with the attribution of pictures is only really of interest when it causes the discovery and the restoration to its true author of a work previously unrecognised ; when it deals merely with elimination, it is too often but the pleasure of a pedant. The point upon which we wish to insist here is that Rembrandt is far from being always equal to himself. We do not pretend to make a merit of this inequality ; but the denial of it would, in our opinion, show a very poor comprehension of his genius.

In this matter, as in all matters, the endeavour to understand should precede the formation of a judgment, and while we think it probable that Rembrandt sometimes fell into error, we are persuaded that far more frequent errors are made on the subject of his works through lack of real sympathy. The same men who are certain that Rembrandt "could not" have etched in such or such a manner, will admire, in his paintings or etchings, profound philosophic intentions at which the artist, not having supposed himself so clever, would have a



REMBRANDT WITH DISHEVELLED HAIR (1630)

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right to stand amazed. They find in the distribution of lights and shadows in an etching (*Christ healing the Sick*, for example) the symbol of a whole system of thought, and do not reflect that if it had suited Rembrandt's arrangement to distribute his light and shade in some quite different way, their ingenuity would have been equal to discovering some other symbol no less weighty. It is the fate of all creators to be "explained" and even to be "demonstrated" by critics and to be claimed by parties. Where an admitted genius such as Rembrandt is concerned, everyone wishes to see in his works the confirmation of his own beliefs, and many refuse to see whatever contradicts them. Thus a critic<sup>1</sup> is found refusing to admit the authenticity of etchings that are considered "broad," his only reason being "the coarseness of the subjects which renders them unworthy of the name of Rembrandt." Affirmations of this kind show a desire in the critic to see an imaginary Rembrandt, adorned by the qualities he himself prefers; to our mind this is the very

<sup>1</sup> Dr Straeter.

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spirit in which it is important not to approach the works of an artist. We do not imagine that the portrait of Rembrandt given here is



REMBRANDT WITH FUR CAP AND COAT (1631)

a faithful likeness, but we desire to show as much of the man as appears to us from an examination of his works; not to make a commentary upon his works in relation to

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an *a priori*, theoretic Rembrandt conceived by our fancy.

To draw a portrait of Rembrandt! Why attempt, in writing and with words, so needless an enterprise, when the artist has left us a whole series of portraits by himself? The task would demand a Rembrandt among writers, who, from a tangle of words massed together in defiance of all the received rules, could evoke a living, unexpected countenance, with keen eyes of piercing scrutiny. We should have to focus the ideas of the reader, and then upon a dark, vague and shifting background illumined by a particular light, should arise the image of the young peasant, lusty, robust, hale, heavily-built, with his large, shiny nose, lumpy forehead, and eyebrows jutting out over eyes that glow in the shadow—the Rembrandt whom his comrades may have seen at twenty. Passing on we should behold him gaining in refinement little by little, acquiring a taste for adorning himself with fine things, sitting to himself before a mirror under all sorts of factitious expressions, showing his joy in having married a woman whom he loved, full of the assurance

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of his own strength and talent, and we should divine the readiness and curiosity with which he would taste every savour of the life around him. Then we should come to the bad times,



REMBRANDT LAUGHING (1630)

the death of Saskia and ruin ; the figure to be evoked now is that of the indefatigable toiler, the workman who suffered nothing to discourage or to distract him, a man weighed down by age and worn by exertions. His

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head, grown bald, is wrapped in a handkerchief or covered by an old hat; the forehead is furrowed by deep wrinkles, and the features drawn; the mouth, compressed by the habit of attention, retains nothing of its former juvenility, the chin has thickened and lies in heavy folds upon the collar of the shirt; the eyes, too, have aged, the lids are red and chafed, but the intensity of the gaze is greater than ever, and hardly to be borne. The pressure of the eye can be felt; it penetrates, seizes, sees. All these things are laid open to our eyes in the works of Rembrandt; we have the privilege of following him stage by stage through the phases of his life. On all who hold these mute conversations with Rembrandt, the artist enforces what manner of man he was -although at the close of any such wordless dialogue with the image of the master, the strange impression remains with us that as between the portrait and ourselves, it is the portrait which has learned most about the other.



REMBRANDT AS A POLISH CAVALIER (1634)

### III

The subjects of Rembrandt's first works, in the taste of his contemporaries and fellow-pupils — Materials from nature—"Still lifes": their importance in a painter's education—Rembrandt's growing interest in his surroundings—Beggars—The "broad" plates—Studies from himself, their utility and their danger—Rembrandt's first successes—His relations with Amsterdam—Attractions of that town; he takes up his abode there.

If we were to say of the years spent by Rembrandt at Leyden after leaving Lastman's studio that they were marked by extraordinarily productive activity, that saying would in no way differentiate them from the other years of the master's life. From the beginning he showed himself what he never ceased to be—an indefatigable worker. Houbraken<sup>1</sup> tells us that at this period "he never left off working

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Houbraken. "De groote Schouburgh der nederlandtsche Konstschilders," 3 vols. Amsterdam, 1718.

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in the house of his parents while daylight lasted." In addition to the portraits of his



HEAD OF AN OLD MAN (ABOUT 1630)

relations mentioned above, Rembrandt produced several pictures of sacred subjects, such

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as were, at that time, a matter of regular tradition upon which young painters did not fail to try their prentice hands. Rembrandt had as fellow-worker and friend young Lievens, who was of about his own age, and we possess several studies of the same subjects made by each of them, evidently in common. Gerard Dow, who was younger than Rembrandt, came to him to ask advice and was working under his guidance. The studies made by Rembrandt at this period have been used by him for many of his pictures. An old man with a white beard whom Lievens painted several times reappears in the pictures that Rembrandt painted at Leyden: *Lot and his Daughters*, the *Baptism of the Eunuch*, the *Philosophers* in the Louvre. An enumeration of the works belonging to this period would show us that Rembrandt was merely following the taste of his contemporaries and fellow-workers in regard to the selection—and often in the execution—of his subjects. But, from this time forward, we may observe in him that irresistible tendency to approach nature, to seek “documents” direct and to penetrate deeply into what he represents, which was to

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become the inexhaustible and productive source of his originality and of his very genius. In these first "subjects taken from the Scriptures," the composition of which was necessarily factitious and in which Rembrandt often showed himself awkward and even ridiculous (as in the fantastic horse of the *Baptism of the Eunuch*) the painter is irresistibly impelled to introduce at least accessories that have some life and reality. In the *Baptism of the Eunuch* the plants in the foreground are copied from nature with extreme care and interest. In the grotto of *St Jerome*, in the prison of *St Paul*, among the papers of the *Money Changer* and the accoutrements of his portraits, we find various objects *seen*, studied and understood. There is no need of an inventory to assure us beyond all doubt that young Rembrandt possessed, even then, some rich stuffs, a velvet cover embroidered in gold, a fur-lined pelisse, arms (a list of them might be drawn up: there was a polished iron gorget that was painted and engraved many times, a helmet, a shield, a quiver and a Java dagger), a metal cup and ewer, pearl earrings, bracelets, gold chains, etc.

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We are absolutely certain that Rembrandt must on several occasions have painted "still lifes," that especial practice of the true painters. Let us remark in passing—and the remark may teach one more than most theories

that the two portrait-painters who are universally acknowledged to possess the gift of "life," Rembrandt and Velasquez, began by carefully painting "still lifes." The execution of the "accessories" in Rembrandt's pictures shows that objects had always a new interest for him: their forms, their colours, their reflected lights, their varying dispositions, the differing qualities of materials appealed to his eye and his hand. A painter who does not care for "things" runs a great risk of painting "abstractions," in other words, of painting the reflection of something that is not. This practice, dangerous enough in words—which are signs—touches absurdity with colours—which are concrete material instruments. The craftsman's part, the handiwork part, has an importance in painting which it is impossible to exaggerate: Rembrandt who seems, as has been sometimes said, "to paint with his soul," painted by means of brushes and colours. In



OLD MAN WITH FUR CAP (ABOUT 1632)

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## REMBRANDT

his paintings, in his etchings, even in his sketches, which seem to bid defiance to every rule, and often to show a method opposed to common sense, Rembrandt has a handicraft, and a handicraft that he knows. This craft is original, unique, surprising, deceptive, impalpable, incomprehensible, if you will, but it is there: we see it feeling its way, taking shape, undergoing incessant modifications and improvements. It springs from *direct* observation of the outer world; the art of painting is nothing else.

We would not, however, make ourselves preachers of realism carried to the extreme far from it. Such a conception of painting would be in discord with the work of Rembrandt. We mean that Rembrandt constantly resorted to the observation of nature, that he incessantly leaned upon her, that from contact with her he drew like Antaeus a strength always fresh; and that if, in some measure, he did transform and "recreate" her according to the laws of his own soul, he always began by adapting himself to her, trying to understand and study, and submitting himself to the strictest discipline. Never, for one moment, did he try

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to show us a nature created by his fancy; his aim was always to translate what he had taken pains to perceive, and the intervention of his creative fancy was almost unconscious. The saying of Bacon remains true: one can only command nature through obeying her.

No object was too humble for Rembrandt. He regarded nothing as "below" or unworthy of his talent. We spoke just now of the armour, the arms and jewellery that he possessed, but the matting, the rosary, the gourd and the hour-glass in St Jerome's grotto were all objects of patient study. Rembrandt did not fall into the inartistic and tedious minuteness of a Gerard Dow, because he never lost sight of the whole he had in view; but everything was of interest to him, and for that reason he knows how to make everything interesting. Some portions of his finest pictures form genuine "still lifes," and we shall several times have occasion to consider this aspect of his talent again. Such etchings as the *Shell*, produced in 1650, prove that, in the full maturity of his powers, Rembrandt applied himself to exercises that are often sup-

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posed to be apprentice work. The admirable *Sketch of a Carriage* reproduced here, shows how the master knew how to observe the most ordinary objects, comprehend their construction, express their character, their build, their weight; how sensitive he was to the play of light upon rough or smooth surfaces, and to the special look of any instrument. Try to analyse the characteristics of this hasty sketch, executed probably in a few minutes in some stable-yard; examine the way in which the locked motion of the wheels is rendered, the fore part slightly turned and the great pole lifted up after the unharnessing of one of those stout, glossy teams that Cuyp was wont to paint. Think what any other man but Rembrandt would have made of it—the patient technique of a Dutchman, the incisive precision of a Dürer, the juggling or the tricky imitation of certain of our contemporaries—and you will be amazed by this drawing which has neither clearness nor precision, nor brio, and which is but a hasty scrawl. Suppress any one line, and you will feel what a coherent and complete whole it is; how, for example, the few lines of the ground and the blot of shadow between the

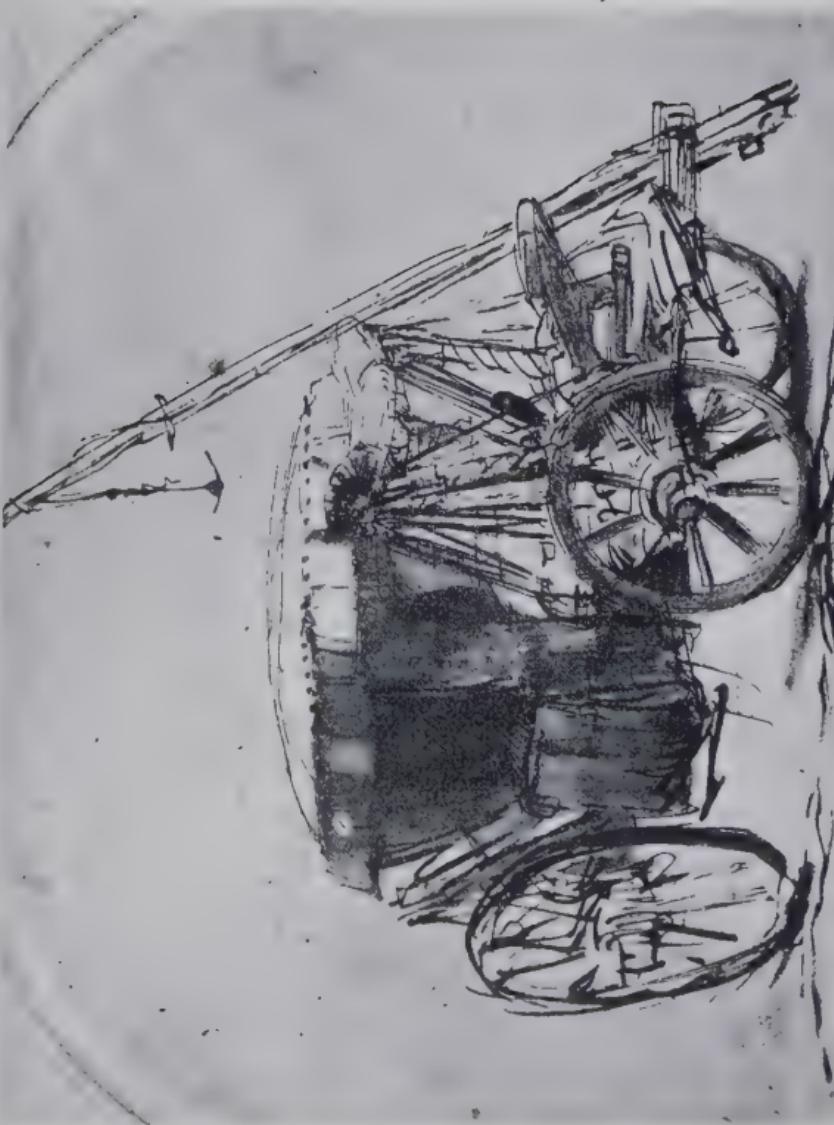
THE PIG (1643)



## REMBRANDT

front wheels help to make of the thing a weighty, movable, grinding and jolting vehicle, stayed before our eyes and noted intelligently. Contemplate the slightly and humorously indicated depression of the seat indented by the weight of the fat coachman, the solid though confused lines of the general hanging, the curious way in which he has marked the great saddlery stitches joining the hood to the roof. Study any chance sketch by the master, observe how he *never* represents a *single* person or a *single* object isolated or *abstracted* from its surroundings; how he *always* marks –even if only a line –the ground, a reflection, a background, a support, some distant figure, some indication of the environment in which the object stands and is steeped. Think how abstract is one of Raphael's studies, for example, in comparison with any casual sketch of Rembrandt's; observe his faculty of *placing* his objects somewhere, in an environment, in a light, in an atmosphere, and you will understand in what way the study of still lifes, of "vanitas" as they used to say in Rembrandt's day, may be of help to a man of genius. You will have no further need of consulting Gerard Moet's catalogue,

A CARRIAGE  
PEN AND WASH DRAWING



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with its mention of a “*vanitas*” by Rembrandt, comprising a skull, a globe, and some books, sold at Amsterdam on the 11th of May 1756 for 31 florins, in order to be sure that Rembrandt derived, from study of the world of things about him, some of his rarest qualities, and even some which seem to be the most mysterious of his genius.

This characteristic faculty of being able to draw from his immediate surroundings all the constituents of his work, always went on developing in Rembrandt. He had recourse less and less to “*turqueries*” and other picturesque devices employed in the fabrication of works of art. The artist capable of moving us by the representation of familiar objects and by paintings of people like ourselves, who live in a world akin to that in which our own lives develop, teaches us more and wins more of our love, than he whose works seek to draw us beyond all reality, into a world peopled by chimeras and painted in imaginary and factitious colours. Such artists may be seductive, but even their variations are soon exhausted; the freest fancy has its limits and soon repeats itself, and those very ones for whom reality

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WOMAN IN BED

PEN DRAWING

## REMBRANDT

was too narrow and too poor, are seen to be restricted within yet narrower borders, and to be always returning —consciously or no — to habitual effects and to inevitable repetitions of the same formulas. Life is the only inexhaustible repertory, he who has learned to go to nature, needs not to go far.

Rembrandt, even in these beginning years, knew how to find what was near him. A great number of sketches and etchings representing familiar domestic and street scenes, date from this period of his sojourn at Leyden, about the year 1630. At the close of the wars Holland was swarming with beggars; we behold them all, blind, one-armed, lame, on crutches, crippled, humped and distorted in every way, covered with rags and tatters, dragging themselves from door to door. Rembrandt followed them pencil in hand, and must at times have called them into his studio. There is nothing in these sketches and etchings of the rather romantic picturesqueness of a Callot (we know that Rembrandt possessed the entire works of the Lorraine engraver), but they show such a true and humane observation that these mendicants might be our contem-



THREE FIGURES  
PEN AND WASH DRAWING

## REMBRANDT

poraries. To those of us who are well acquainted with the work of Rembrandt, some chance beggar at the corner of a village street will seem to be an old acquaintance. The same watchful curiosity upon every point, led Rembrandt to surprise his fellows even in their most secret attitudes, and in postures in which it is least customary to represent men; and thus arise those "broad" etchings which awaken the indignation of those who do not know that such things exist under the sun.

Dating from the two years 1630 and 1631 alone, there are no less than twenty etchings by Rembrandt representing himself. In those Dutch houses, mirrors hanging on the walls or by the windows abounded to such a degree that there is no "interior" of the time that does not show one or more looking-glasses with reflections of something or somebody. Rembrandt must therefore often have chanced to see his own image. He has sat to himself in every kind of way, bareheaded with smooth or ruffled locks, in a hat, a cap, a fur head-dress, clothed in all sorts of gewgaws, overloaded with jewels, draped in cloaks; he has tried to mimic the most varied emotions:

## REMBRANDT

gaiety, terror, pain, sadness, attention, joy, laughter or anger. That this pretence of expressing emotion should often have led him to studies that were rather caricatures and to artificial grimaces is easily conceivable, and may explain the emphasis, the really grimacing exaggeration to which Rembrandt gave way in the people-faces of some of his pictures and etchings (the *Ecce Homo* for example). By dint of thus hunting out in voluntary mimicry the salient signs, visible features and manifest effects of emotion, the artist assumed the defects of the actor and was in danger of becoming theatrical; a regrettable inclination that may be recognised in several of his early works. His taste for deeper and truer observation happily cured Rembrandt of this tendency to exaggerate the expression and carry its exterior signs to the extreme. His best pictures are masterpieces of controlled emotion, discreet and deep. His early works had given him a knowledge of his craft that allowed him to express all he felt. The series of etchings of which we are speaking shows to what degree he knew how to vary his researches; now applying himself to study the modifica-

## REMBRANDT

tions introduced by this or that illumination, and working in masses of light and shade; now following the design closely and minutely; and now again carrying his study of the relief of some form to so exaggerated a point as to forget its proportions and modelling his nose as a nose of immoderate dimensions.

Several of the pictures painted by Rembrandt at this period (*Judas bringing back the Price of his Betrayal*, *The Presentation in the Temple*, *Jesus among the Doctors*, *The little Circumcision*, *Saint Anastasius*, etc.) gained their author a local celebrity from the time of their appearance. A good many portraits began to be ordered from him; he was known at Amsterdam, where the current of artistic interest ran higher. We know that he had dealings with a picture-seller of that town, Hendrick van Uylenborch; Messrs Bredius and de Roever<sup>1</sup> have even discovered a legal document, executed at Amsterdam on the 20th of June 1631, according to which Rembrandt lent Hendrick van Uylenborch the sum of 1000 florins. which proves not only that Rembrandt had permanent relations with this

<sup>1</sup> "Oud-Holland," v.



FIGURE OF A WOMAN  
PEN DRAWING

## REMBRANDT

dealer, but also that his financial position was very satisfactory.

Several citizens and notables of Amsterdam having ordered their portraits from Rembrandt, he found himself obliged to make frequent journeys to that town. The father was dead ; Lysbeth van Ryn, who had not married, was taking care of her mother ; nothing compelled the painter to remain at Leyden, while various reasons impelled him to go to Amsterdam. Life at that great seaport was then at its height. From the Indies, from Java, Borneo and Brazil, vessels were coming in laden with exotic products, manned by crews of all races, and bringing foreign goods and animals ; the quays swarmed with a motley crowd, that must have appealed to the young master's curiosity. Rembrandt, though he knew how to find matter for his work in his environment, yet seems always to have been interested in the products of remote civilisations. We have already said that he had foreign trinkets in his collection ; and we have several sketches copied from Persian and Hindoo miniatures, and in which notwithstanding his desire to be faithful to the original, Rembrandt's strongly



OLD MAN IN AN ARM CHAIR  
PEN AND WASH DRAWING

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## REMBRANDT

marked individuality shows through in a very droll way. These notes taken from eastern works of art, prove to what a degree Rembrandt's mind must have been open and receptive to all original artistic manifestations. One guesses how much he would have loved the Japanese if he could have known their drawings, so curiously akin in some ways to his own. We also possess several drawings of Rembrandt's after Italian masters (Raphael, Vinci, etc). The irresistible way in which he forthwith makes "a Rembrandt" of Raphael's *Balthazar Castiglione*, for instance, is one proof among many others that photographic likeness was not the master's aim, and that he transforms or transposes into his own manner everything he sees. Sometimes, indeed, we find him copying with scrupulous fidelity; so that in a copy from Mantegna (see pp. 74, 75), he imitates even the handwriting of the names, but loses the whole Italian arabesque and style.

Amsterdam was quite the place to delight the ever searching spirit of this artist, who both by disposition and by wise instinct was a stay-at-home; here, if he wanted a few minutes' distraction, he could touch the far parts of the



COPY OF A PERSIAN MINIATURE  
PEN AND WASH DRAWING

## REMBRANDT

earth in a few steps ; see negroes and negresses, study the massive solidity, the heavy, noiseless gait, rough, wrinkled hide and roguish eye of an elephant, and returning home by way of the quays, mingle unrecognised in the crowd of poor people—as he could scarcely manage at Leyden. Descartes writes, in a letter to M. de Balzac, dated from Amsterdam on the 5th of May 1631 : “En cette grande ville où je suis, n'y ayant aucun homme, excepté moi, qui n'exerce la marchandise, chacun est tellement attentif à son profit que j'y pourrais demeurer toute ma vie sans être jamais vu de personne.”<sup>1</sup> If we do not greatly err this possibility of observing without being noticed must have been not the least of the attractions that drew Rembrandt towards the large town ; he went to Ansterdam in 1631.

<sup>1</sup> “In this great town wherein I am, there being no man, save me, who does not pursue commerce, everyone is so attentive to his own profit that I might remain here all my life unseen of any.”

DRAWING OF AN ELEPHANT



## IV

Rembrandt's first pictures at Amsterdam—His portraits—Their personality—Rembrandt not a virtuoso—Hals and Rembrandt—His constant aiming at life—Portraits of two persons together—His great success; his portraits the fashion—Compositions of this period—Studies from female models—Rembrandt's paintings of the nude—Their "lack of beauty"—Their beauty.

AFTER having, at first, asked hospitality from his friend Van Uylenborch, Rembrandt established himself on the west of the town, in a warehouse looking into the Bloemgracht and at once set to work, painting the many portraits that were ordered from him. The greater part of his time at this stage of his life seems to have been devoted to fulfilling these commissions which soon flocked upon him. The portraits produced by Rembrandt during his first years at Amsterdam show the painter already in possession of his full powers and are reckoned among his most celebrated. We shall not attempt to enumerate them, nor even



WOMAN WITH A BABY  
PEN AND WASH DRAWING

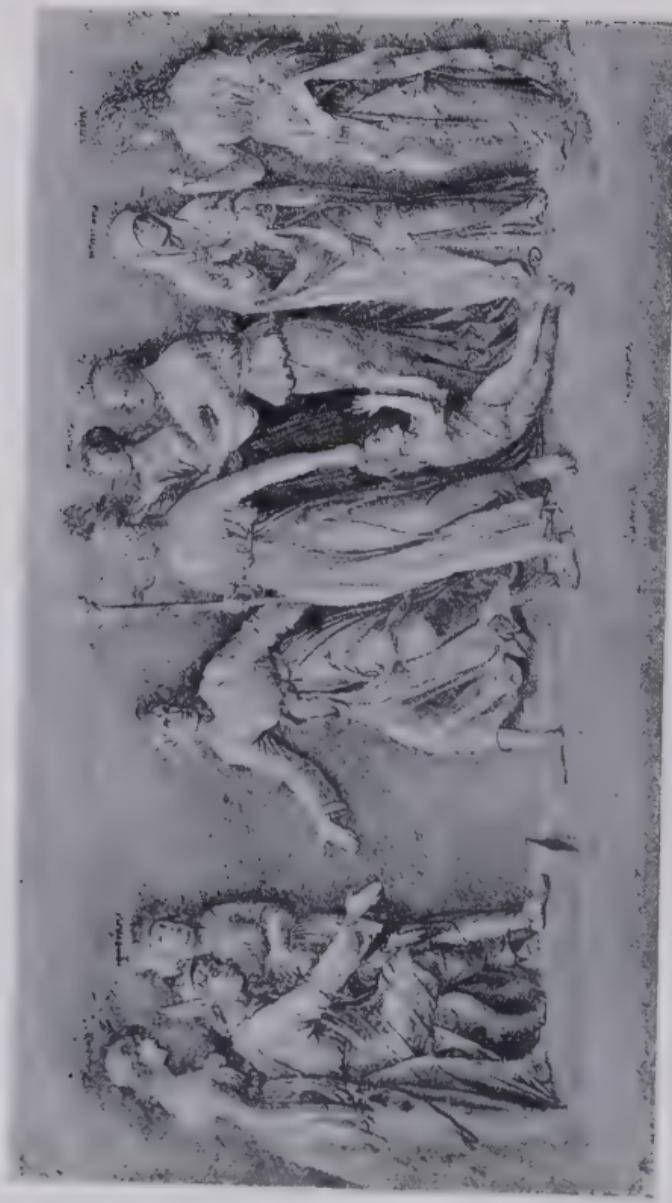
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to describe his technique, which was always flexible and was modified according to circumstances. Every fresh commission gave rise to a fresh quest and a fresh divination. Rembrandt never repeats himself; never thinks he has arrived. A certain manner of presenting such or such a person, such an effect of light, such a tonality, please the public, succeed and bring the painter new commissions: it matters nothing to him; he modifies his work entirely, according to the person whom he is to portray; he will attempt to satisfy himself and will never content himself; will care nothing for "what is expected" from him, will go on, and ever on, in his constant endeavour to express life. At a time when most portrait-painters, even artists of talent, confined themselves to certain portrait formulas which contented them and their public, we see Rembrandt always striving to increase his range. Houbraken tells us that before beginning a portrait he made many rough drawings and sketches, trying various attitudes, lights and expressions. Considering the prodigious gifts with which Rembrandt was endowed, and the certainty which he had attained in expressing whatever

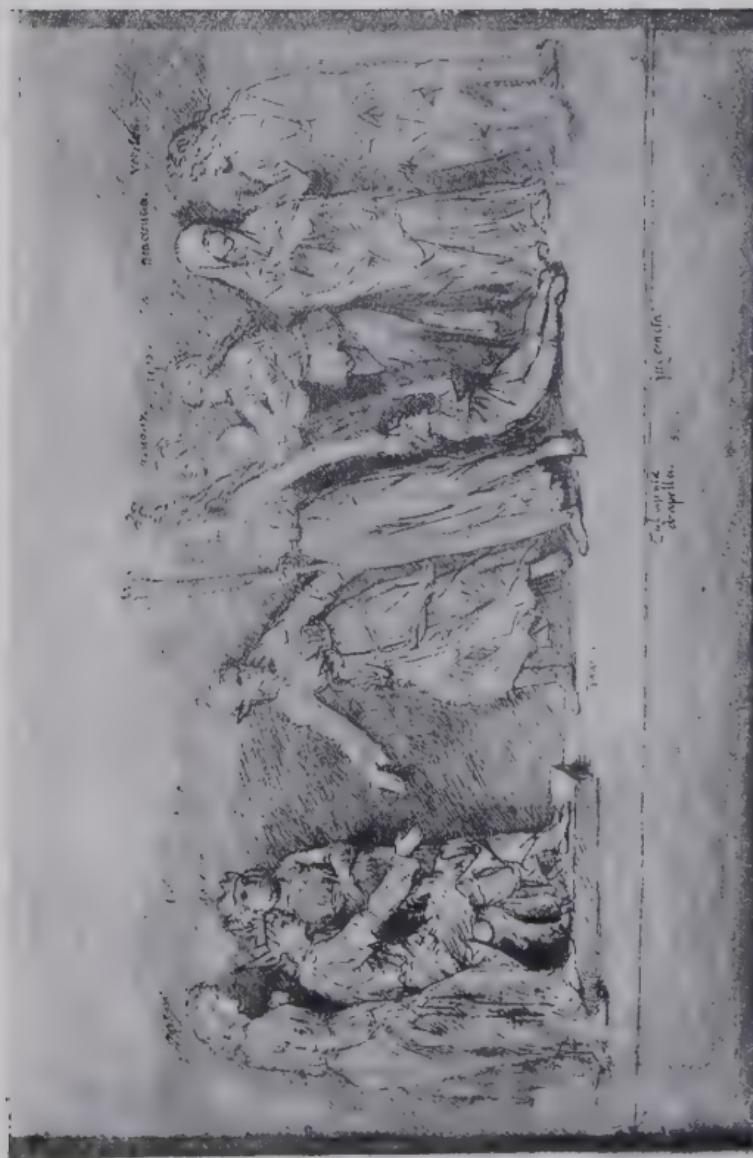
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he desired, this constant effort, this freshness of spirit, this timidity (if we may be allowed to employ that word in a purely eulogistic sense) in face of nature might appear surprising to such of our contemporaries as are accustomed to measure genius by assurance, the worth of a man by the importance he assumes, and talent by the art of astonishing. Those who love Rembrandt as he has to be loved will feel that precisely herein lurks the mysterious source of his genius: a passionate love of what he wishes to do, constant application to what he is doing.

Most of the portraits represent ordinary people in their ordinary clothes, good housewives, calm, orderly and solid, sat to him in their everyday dresses without any accessories. So natural are some of these pictures that they hardly seem to be composed at all. What, then, is unique in them? In the Ryks Museum at Amsterdam are two very similar portraits, of *Elizabeth Bas*, *The Admiral's Widow*, one by Rembrandt (painted about 1643) and one by Franz Hals. The Franz Hals is an admirable painting, a "masterpiece" in the proper sense of the word. The Rembrandt is



THE CALUMNY OF APELLES  
PEN DRAWING BY MANTEGNA



COPY OF MANTEGNA'S DRAWING BY REMBRANDT

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a person, living her inner life. Face to face with her we find ourselves again questioning her eyes, watching her mouth, feeling the inexplicable. Franz Hals amazes us by his skill; Rembrandt makes us forget his. The first shows all he has at first sight; the other preserves his mystery. It is not of the painter's cleverness that we think as we stand before this old lady, so calm, so experienced, shrewd of eye, accustomed to judge of men and of things, and in full possession of the powers of a fine old age. The more one looks at this portrait the more one finds in it; it almost seems to change from day to day according to one's own inner moods; while Hals' remains always the same; and it is almost necessary to compare the two pictures in order to see how masterly is the treatment in Rembrandt's painting, and to perceive that his picture no less is a masterpiece of technical skill.

As we contemplate these two portraits so alike in appearance and so fundamentally different, we feel that the manner of comprehending and interpreting is everything. To seize relations that others would not have grasped, and to bring them to light: this is

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the art, and in this art there are all degrees. Rembrandt reveals affinities that no one had seen before him; nor has anyone advanced far in the path which he revealed. We stand before the portrait of some burgher's wife with a perfectly simple face, a gentle gaze, and a heavy, slackened mouth upon which sensuality lies asleep, and we reflect what any other painter would have made of this head, which owes its existence to Rembrandt.

“Ta lampe n'a brûlé qu'en empruntant ma flamme;  
Comme le grand Convive aux noces de Cana  
Je changeais en vin pur les fadeurs de ton âme  
Et ce fut un festin dont plus d'un s'étonna.”<sup>1</sup>

We are reminded of a genial actor playing all his parts in a magnificent and unexpected manner, and giving to each an intense, individual life of its own. But beneath all the masks into which he breathes life, the great actor can be recognised; but for him the

<sup>1</sup> “The light in thy lamp was but borrowed from mine;  
As at Cana the great wedding-guest did of old,  
I changed the dim void of thy soul into wine  
And the feast was a wonder for men to behold.”

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persons of the drama would be quite other, nay, sometimes would not be at all.

This spirit of life which Rembrandt puts into everything he paints, comes from the perfect balance of the whole, but is present even in the rough first draft. A hasty sketch from the master's hand will already perceptibly contain the feeling of a finished picture. An apparently formless outline will be palpitating with life, and will have an unapproachable depth of expression. So much is this the case that it becomes difficult to say which is the more worthy of admiration, the power of putting so much life into the bare indications of a sketch or that of leaving so much life in pictures very highly finished.

Some portraits of children, very cleverly brushed in and exquisitely fresh in their remarkable sobriety of colouring, look out on us with candid eyes. Others in which the execution is very thorough, arranged with perfect knowledge, bathed in a warm golden and amber light which is almost an aureole, are endowed with unfathomable sweetness. In every touch we feel the artist master of his picture, in none merely



PORTRAIT OF COPPENOL (ABOUT 1651)

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the virtuoso. Rembrandt is always respectful, even in his moments of most surprising boldness. He is never jocular, never indifferent.

In his eagerness to seize life Rembrandt was not satisfied with animating separate portraits; instead of painting a portrait of the husband and a portrait of the wife, he sets himself to group the two persons on one canvas, to surprise them in a characteristic and significant attitude, to render them "in action," talking together in their house, or handling familiar objects. Such is the origin of the marvellous composition of the *Shipbuilder and his Wife* (1633) and of *Pastor Ansloo consoling a Widow* (1641) and many others. It was through this incessant study of expression in repose, of action in very slight gestures, and of emotion in immobility, that the master attained the power of producing at a later time the incomparable masterpiece of the *Syndics*.

His career at Amsterdam opened most successfully, and Rembrandt's portraits became the rage. They were so much sought after, Houbraken tells us, that sitters were compelled to wait a long time for their turn with the



BURGOMASTER SIX (1647)

Rf

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artist, and that “he had not only to be paid but to be prayed.”

All the time left him by the many portraits which he had on hand was employed by Rembrandt in producing various compositions (*The Good Samaritan*, *Judith*, *The Rape of Proserpine*, *The Rape of Europa*, *St Peter*, etc.), both painted and etched. Among the advantages of Amsterdam was the possibility of procuring female models, whom he seems not to have been able to find in Leyden. Rembrandt hastened no doubt to seize the chance of studying the nude female figure, for to this period belong several pictures, drawings, and etchings representing naked women. Rembrandt’s treatment of the female body generally furnishes all his critics and many of his admirers with an opportunity of displaying the excellence and refinement of their taste. With one voice they deplore that Rembrandt should exhibit such “coarse wenches.” Works devoted to the glorification of Rembrandt solicit the indulgence of the public on this point . . . or even throw up the case, feeling clearly that it is impossible to make excuses for these creatures “with their mannish faces, drooping bosoms,

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flabby and inflated stomachs and legs disfigured by the degrading (!) marks of the garters which they have just removed," etc. The spectacle of a body that does not conform to "pure beauty" is intolerable to people who, let us say, are not Antinoüs. But why are they not astonished that Rembrandt should have painted faces which also are very remote from classical types of beauty? How comes it that portraits of ugly people—very ugly indeed according to academic rules—are admitted and even admired, while a representation of the bodies surmounted by these same faces is to be forbidden? Is it on the ground that the appearance of the face and hands expresses moral qualities which cannot be expressed by the body? But, to those who can see, a back, a shoulder, or a thigh have their revelations, and it is not the painter who is accountable for the lack of vision of those who look at his works. Some people are shocked at the "realism" of these works; their purity revolts. Purity has nothing to do with the matter. Rembrandt was neither pure nor impure; he was a painter. He was studying forms and colours; and it is as preposterous to accuse



DRAWING FOR THE PORTRAIT OF CORNELIUS  
CLAES ANSLO (1640)



PORTRAIT OF ANSLO (1641)

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him of immodesty because he painted the bodies of his countrywomen, as it would be to attribute to him a taste for bloodshed because he painted the admirable *Flayed Ox* of the Louvre. Moreover, it is generally allowed that painters have a right to paint the nude—it is the *manner* in which Rembrandt paints it which shocks such critics; and the man who delights in a suggestive Greuze will hide his face before a simple and sincere Rembrandt. It is established by a sort of tacit agreement that the nude, to be allowed, must be “beautiful.” We shall see presently that the nudes of Rembrandt have great beauty; but we may be allowed to enquire here: What is the law in virtue of which the nude must be beautiful?—Because we expect painters to arouse in us a sense of the beauty of things.—But do you find “beauty” not only in the faces but also in the costumes in which the persons of the pictures you admire are clothed? What can be more grotesque, if we choose to see it in that light, than a starched and goffered ruff upon which the head rests as upon a plate? How ridiculous are the shapes imparted to the women by their heavy, dull-



PORTRAIT OF CLEMENT DE JONGHE (1651)

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black skirts, their stiff, ill-cut bodices with humped shoulders, and their white caps over closely drawn-back hair! Do the coats of the Syndics, or their conical hats, or the costumes of the *Night Watch* remind you of the harmonious draperies in the friezes of the Parthenon? And if you admit that Rembrandt has been able to find and to make you feel a new beauty, that had not been expressed before his day, in the lines, colours and reflections of his fellow-townsmen's clothed bodies, why do you refuse to see the delicate tones, the palpitating flesh, the marvellous suppleness of line and modelling, the comprehension of certain harmonies of the human body shown by Rembrandt in his nudes? Accustomed to see the representatives of an academic tradition exhibit their carefully cleaned, smoothed and polished dolls, so "ideally" beautiful that they could not, indeed, have any sort of real existence, the sight of something real shocks and disgusts you; but to feel thus is as puerile as to regret that peasant-women do not wear the costumes of the ballet, or that sunrises are not so well managed in reality as on the stage.



DIANA AT THE BATH (ABOUT 1631)

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Assuredly, the nudes of the Italian masters for instance have a *different* beauty from that of the nudes of Rembrandt, but why do the people who pity Rembrandt because he could not have beautiful Italians for models, not pity him also for having to talk the Dutch language, which is less musical than the dialect of Venice? No doubt Rembrandt would have taken pleasure in contemplating some beautiful Italian girl, purely and amply formed like the models whom Titian painted; but we have no assurance that, after having duly admired her, he would not have gone back by choice to one of his Dutch "wenches." "Classic" beauty is not his province. Life is what he seeks, the life that he knows and understands; the life of his fellow-countrymen and his contemporaries. They are no gods and goddesses whom Rembrandt paints, nothing could look less like immortals. His faces are of the earth; we feel them to be made of flesh like ourselves, subject to diseases, to infirmities, to sufferings like us; marked like us by every day that brings them nearer to the grave. Like us they may show an immaterial moral beauty shining through their weakness (we shall see by and



ARTIST AND MODEL (ABOUT 1647)

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by Rembrandt's manner of understanding Jesus), but they are not fed on ambrosia and nectar, they are not ethereal: dust they are and to dust they will return.

When, yielding to the taste of the day, he sets himself to compose some mythological picture, he generally fails, or else his compositions are mythological only in name and are full of a thoroughly Dutch life. He understands and loves those rather heavy women, soft of flesh and soon faded, whom he is reproached for portraying; he expresses the something living, feminine, and sometimes profoundly charming that lurks in these bodies, too soon deformed by work, by motherhood, by the habit of clothes. He suffuses them with an inimitable atmosphere; one or two of his etchings are almost iridescent, so clearly felt is the play of light upon the plump shoulders and upon the folds and dimples of the body. Through all Rembrandt's nudes runs the tremor of the living skin and the caress of light. Ten years before his death we find him engraving the beautiful Negress *lying down*; he very likely seized the opportunity of studying forms and flesh tints new to him—unexpected qualities



STUDY OF A NUDE WOMAN SEATED  
WASH DRAWING

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of values and light ; but whether he is using a "wench," or whether it is the young Saskia or, later on, Hendrickje who stands for him, his concern is never about classic lines. In a mere sketch of a young woman standing (see page 95), as well as in the "broad" plates which the great virtue of our day is unable to face, or again in that extraordinary etching of *Adam and Eve* where, by dint of expressing animal life together with desire, Rembrandt succeeds in carrying back our thoughts to prehistoric ancestors (it might almost be called a Darwinian etching), it is always *the expression of life* that Rembrandt pursues and attains. More or less of conformity to a certain canon of beauty is very indifferent to him : Rembrandt was not an æsthete.

All Rembrandt's works from the nude, and in particular from the female figure, are endowed in the highest degree with this quality of life, which animates them in every part. A sensibility pulsates through them that renders them near to us, not inaccessible and remote as are certain nudes which retain nothing of the human. If any one of our contemporaries, worn out by the driving life of



STUDY OF A NUDE WOMAN STANDING  
WASH DRAWING

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towns, or any townswoman of the twentieth century, deformed by stays, grown heavy by over-feeding, or exhausted by a life in which little consideration is given to "eurhythmy," should be tempted to reproach Rembrandt with a realism that seems at first sight excessive, they should reflect that Rembrandt is perhaps the only one of the old masters who would have been capable of feeling, expressing, and making us understand and love the living charm and grace hidden in these bodies of ours, bodies on which we heap our mendacious dresses, and of which we fear the nakedness because we do not know how to see the beauty.



NEGRESS LYING DOWN (1658)

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## V

“Theatres of anatomy”—*The Anatomy Lesson*—Saskia van Uylenborch—Rembrandt’s marriage—Portraits of Saskia—Rembrandt’s great reputation—He takes pupils—Rembrandt’s principal pupils—The arrangement of his studio—Purchase of curiosities, collections and works of art—Rembrandt’s prodigality—He acquires the house in the Breestraat—The Jewish quarter.

At the time when Rembrandt came to dwell in Amsterdam that city already possessed a “theatre of anatomy” like the one which he might have seen at Leyden. “Theatre of anatomy” was the name given to the halls, with raised concentric seats, in which the professors of medicine gave their lectures and dissected before an audience. Little by little it had become the custom to ornament these halls with minerals, crystals, and specimens of all sorts, preparations of natural curiosities and the skeletons of animals and persons. Busts of celebrated physicians were placed in them,



STUDIES OF A NUDE YOUNG MAN  
ON THE SAME PLATE A SKETCH OF AN OLD WOMAN WITH  
A BABY (ABOUT 1646)

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and before long a habit arose of decorating the walls with pictures representing the professors of anatomy engaged in their functions. An engraving by W. Swanenburch is in existence which represents the Leyden "Theatre of Anatomy" in 1610, and shows us in the central space reserved for the professor a dissecting table with bodies that have been opened. Along the lines of seats are ranged stuffed animals and all kinds of skeletons as well as human skeletons<sup>1</sup> bearing banners inscribed with Latin mottoes : *Principium moriendi natalis est ; Nascentes morimur ; Mors ultima linea rerum*, etc. In the background a large glass case displays scalpels, knives, saws and other surgical instruments. In the body of the hall are spectators walking about, several of whom are ladies ; one of these is looking with interest at a human skin newly taken from a corpse and shown to her by a doctor, much in the manner of a shopman offering some article of hosiery to our admiration. We know that

<sup>1</sup> One of these skeletons is riding on the skeleton of a horse. Two others face to face stand under a tree, the one giving an apple to the other. They represent Adam and Eve.



THE WOMAN BY THE STOVE (1658)

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such spectacles were much the fashion, and a contemporary tells us that on market days these halls were even frequented by the countrymen and countrywomen of the neighbourhood. Monsieur de Monconys, who paid a visit in 1663 to the "Theatre of Anatomy" in Leyden, says that it is "very pretty, shaped like an amphitheatre of wood, very clean, and that it contains "an infinity of skeletons of men and animals and several rarities."<sup>1</sup>

The theatre of anatomy in Amsterdam was already adorned with several "anatomy lessons" when in 1632 Dr. Tulp, a celebrated physician and surgeon, gave Rembrandt a commission to paint him in a picture which he wished to offer as a memento of his professorship to the corporation of surgeons. Everyone knows Rembrandt's celebrated picture in which, in a vaulted hall, Professor Tulp, wearing a wide brimmed hat, is shown dissecting the arm of a body in the presence of seven spectators. Much has been written about this painting, both in extreme eulogy and in immoderate

<sup>1</sup> "Journal of the travels of Monsieur de Monconys; travels in Holland in 1663." Lyons, 1677.

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disparagement. In our opinion it is a very interesting work, in that it assuredly marks a certain stage in the painter's life; the good, steady, attentive painting of a young master. In the grouping of his characters, Rembrandt has endeavoured to avoid the frigid symmetry of his predecessors. He wanted his sitters not to look "posed." Whether he has completely succeeded may be questioned. The face of the *teacher Tulp* is admirable and genuinely didactic. It is easy to conceive how vastly superior Rembrandt's canvas must have been to those around in the headquarters of the doctors' guild. In the *Anatomy Lesson*, which for him was but a beginning, Rembrandt revealed himself without a peer and established himself in the public admiration. If the works that he produced subsequently make us fastidious and teach us to find here rather indications of the course of development followed by the artist's genius, than matter for complete admiration, we must remember that this picture was Rembrandt's first large composition, and that it marks, as has been fairly said, "a date in the history of Dutch painting"; on these grounds its celebrity is easily



PEN AND WASH DRAWING FOR THE PORTRAIT  
OF SYLVIUS



## PORTRAIT OF JAN CORNELISZ SYLVIUS (1646)

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understood. Let us further add—for we must not suffer ourselves to be led away by certain criticisms—that the picture in no degree requires indulgence; it is a fine strong work, capable of affording keen pleasure to those who look well at it—and if we choose to hold Rembrandt responsible for the rhapsodies that have been written about it, why, we shall ourselves be the only sufferers.

In 1632—and owing to the striking success of the *Anatomy Lesson*—Rembrandt's celebrity was established, and we know already that he had a number of portraits to paint (more than forty may be reckoned up between 1632 and 1634). One of these portraits, dating from 1632, represents a fair-haired young girl seen in profile. The execution is very careful and at the same time very simple; we are made acquainted with a full face already showing signs of a double chin, a brilliant complexion, fair, lightly frizzled hair, a little nose, thickening a trifle at the end, and a ripe, gentle mouth. This is Saskia van Uylenborch, who was soon to become Rembrandt's wife.

She was the daughter of a juris consult belonging to a rich patrician family of Fries-

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land, was an orphan, and a cousin of that Hendrick van Uylenborch to whom we have seen Rembrandt lending money at the time of his leaving Leyden. In 1632 Saskia was living with the pastor Sylvius, and we may allow ourselves to suppose that the presence of the young girl had something to do with the visits which Rembrandt paid at the house of Sylvius and to which we owe several etchings representing him.<sup>1</sup> Certain it is that from the day on which Rembrandt first shows Saskia to us he never ceases to make drawings, pictures and etchings of her or to take every opportunity of seeing her.

The idea of the marriage could hardly be displeasing to the young girl's family. Rembrandt was the most conspicuous artist in Amsterdam; everyone agreed in prophesying a brilliant future for him. He was known to be steady, home-keeping, and, although earning much money and already rich, exceedingly temperate. Houbraken records that "when he was at work, he contented himself with a piece of cheese or a herring with bread."

<sup>1</sup> The portrait of Sylvius reproduced here is of 1646, but a print exists of 1633.

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His only expenses were those made to enrich his collections. Besides, the portraits of himself made at this period show him full of vigour, perfectly at ease, careful in dress; and thus no doubt he showed himself to the young Saskia. He asked her in marriage in 1632 and the pair were betrothed, but the marriage was deferred until after Saskia came of age. An admirable portrait in the museum of Cassel shows us the young girl, wearing a very rich costume and a scarlet velvet hat with white plumes; she is loaded with valuable jewellery and her right hand presses to her bosom a leaf of rosemary; rosemary at that time was in Holland an emblem of betrothal. It is Saskia again who appears in one of the pictures known as *The Betrothed Jewess* (1632); she it is also who is painted as *Flora* (Museum of the Hermitage) crowned and wreathed about with flowers, and placed at the entrance of a leafy cave (1634).

On the 10th of June 1634, in the marriage register of Amsterdam, the "predicant" Sylvius, cousin of Saskia, becomes surety for her<sup>z</sup> and engages to furnish his legal consent to the marriage before the third publication. On his



SIX SKETCHES OF HEADS, FIVE ARE SASKIA (1636)

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part Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, of Leyden, giving his age as twenty-six, and residing in the Breestraat, engages to furnish the consent of his mother, and signs. The marriage took place on the 22nd of June at the town-hall, and at the parish church of the district.

There is in the Berlin gallery a charming pencil sketch representing Saskia in a large garden hat, her head leaning upon one flexible hand, while the other holds a flower; beneath is written: "This is the portrait of my wife when she was twenty-one, the third day after we were married."<sup>1</sup> From the first hours of their union Saskia enters upon that task of being a model which she seems to have fulfilled until her death with indefatigable good-will. As *Artemisia*, as *Judith*, or as the *Betrothed of Tobias*, as a young woman dressing (the Burgomaster *Pancratius and his Wife*),<sup>2</sup> as the

<sup>1</sup> All sorts of conjectures have been made in regard to the date which follows (8th June 1633); we will not speak of them here. It is probable that Rembrandt added the inscription several years later and he was no better at chronology than at accounts.

<sup>2</sup> This picture, which is at Buckingham Palace, represents Rembrandt and his wife.



PORTRAIT OF SASKIA (1634)

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*Small Jewish Bride*, the *Large Jewish Bride*, as *Danae*, as *Susannah at the Bath*, in a whole series of paintings, etchings and sketches, we find Saskia again and again, and we divine that amorous gaze, penetrating, almost obsessing, with which Rembrandt's eye must have pursued her in their home. She awakens sympathy, there is something touching in the tenderness and—let us say the word—the resignation of this little Saskia, the charming woman who has given herself entirely to a husband attacked by that most implacable disease—painting. Whatever may have been Rembrandt's affection, Saskia must always have felt—whether dimly or no—that she held but the second place in her husband's heart and that his best belonged to something other than herself: to the whole, to the living world, the world of form and light and shade—to painting. If the later part of his life proved that the presence of a woman in his home was necessary to him, it is nevertheless probable that Rembrandt was more painter than husband, more artist than lover. When he represents himself (in the gallery of Dresden) carousing, and in the dress of a cavalier, sitting

THE SHELL (1650)

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by a well covered table with little Saskia on one of his knees, a deep glass of Rhine wine in his hand and a wide laugh upon his face, it is more a painting than joy. The idea of work to be done never left him. He did not know how to be careless, like a Franz Hals, for example; and if in the painter's art he reached an unequalled intensity of life and emotion, it may be questioned whether this was not at the cost of his life as a man. "No man can serve two masters," said He whom Rembrandt has so often set living before our eyes. Rembrandt had given himself to a master who possessed him wholly: work, implacable work, the *labor improbus* of the Latin author. The passion of work had kept him away from holiday-making, from the drinking-bouts and banquets in which his contemporaries took their pleasure; the passion of work was made the ruling spirit of his house; to work everything was sacrificed, the master first of all and, by him, Saskia. The impression of all this may long remain unfelt; for our own part we long saw no more than Saskia's kind smile and her great gentleness. But one day the wife of a painter of our acquaintance, looking through



'THE LARGE "JEWISH BRIDE," SASKIA (1634)

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a series of these smiling images, said : “ She does not look happy.” That day, resignation, a gentle and cheerful resignation, appeared to us beneath the smile, and we are no longer able to forget it whenever we look on the features of the young woman whose remaining eight years of life were spent, silently and discreetly, in that luminous shadow which the master peopled with his visions.

The reputation of Rembrandt continued to increase ; his portraits, paintings and etchings fetched high prices. His talent grew daily more vigorous, and he did not neglect to strengthen it by all sorts of studies both from the model and from various objects of still life (such as the fish, hare and bittern mentioned in his inventory). So great was the predominance of Rembrandt at this time that, Houbraken tells us, “ one could only please the public by imitating his manner.” His fellow artists tried to follow him both in the choice of subjects and the costume of persons, and as soon as the master decided to take pupils, they came to him from every part of Holland and even from neighbouring countries. Ferdinand Bol, Govert Flinck, Van den Eekhout and Jan



YOUTH SURPRISED BY DEATH (1639)

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Victors were the first who came to receive instruction from Rembrandt. At a later time arrived artists from Germany and from Denmark. Then Nicholas Maes, Carel Fabritius, Philips de Koninck, Samuel van Hoogstraaten, and, in the last years of the master's life, Aert van Gelder are the most celebrated of Rembrandt's many pupils.

Joachim de Sandrart, who was Rembrandt's contemporary, says, speaking of his activity and his profits: "His house at Amsterdam was filled by numerous pupils from good families, each of whom paid him annually as much as 100 florins, without reckoning the money brought in by their paintings and engravings, which, apart from his personal earnings, may be estimated at a sum of 2000 to 2500 florins." Houbraken, speaking of the way in which Rembrandt installed his pupils, tells us that "each was isolated in his cell, divided off by partitions of mere canvas, or even paper, so that he could work from nature in his own way, without troubling himself about the others." A drawing by Rembrandt, in the Louvre, confirms these statements and shows us one of these "cells" with a student

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working from a female model seated near him ; in one corner a man in a large hat is drawing or etching ; in another part an assistant is grinding colours ; while towards the background, adjoining stalls stand open like compartments in a lobby.

As wealth came to him Rembrandt permitted himself to indulge his tastes as a collector<sup>1</sup> more freely. He made himself a perfect museum of precious materials, stuffed animals, arms and armour, casts from nature and from the antique, as well as of engravings, drawings and pictures by artists of repute. The register of sales shows him buying drawings by Adrian Brauwer in 1635, and "paintings, prints, shells, horns of animals, etc. . . ." <sup>2</sup> in 1637. In the same year we find him buying a picture by Rubens, *Hero and Leander*, for 424 florins. Baldinucci states that : "when Rembrandt was present at a sale, especially one of paint-

<sup>1</sup> We know that Rembrandt always sought after the best materials for a painter : he was in relation with Holland colonial firms to obtain certain rare colours, Chinese and Japanese paper for his etchings, etc.

<sup>2</sup> "Oud-Holland," v.

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ings or drawings by masters, he would start by so high a bid that no other purchaser would offer, and to persons who expressed surprise at this conduct he would answer that in this way he intended to exalt his profession." The same author informs us of the liberality with which Rembrandt lent — or gave — "everything he had" to other artists who wanted to borrow.

Many legends have been current about the supposed avarice of Rembrandt, while the obvious truth is that Rembrandt was rather prodigal and often, as Baldinucci says, pushed "his kindness to the verge of folly." The end of his life gave but too clear a proof that Rembrandt did not hoard; on the contrary he spent his own money and that of his wife recklessly in the continual purchase of new adornments, new jewels for the decoration of his habitual model. So much was this the case that several of Saskia's relatives having spread a report that the young wife "had squandered her patrimony in ornaments and ostentation," Rembrandt, who was not long-suffering, brought an action against these "defamers" on account of "this slander entirely contrary to the truth" and asked for damages, declaring that "his wife

VIEW OF AMSTERDAM (ABOUT 1640)



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and he are richly and even abundantly provided with wealth.”<sup>1</sup>

But we know, in contradiction of his statement, that Rembrandt had already several times been in difficulties for money. His correspondence with the Prince of Orange’s secretary shows the painter announcing on the 27th January 1639 the completion of the *Entombment* and the *Resurrection* and begging for speedy payment “which would be extremely useful to him at this moment”; on the 13th February, again imparting his wish to “receive the payment at Amsterdam as soon as possible”; and a few days later urging his correspondent once more that the “order may be prepared with the utmost speed.”

On several previous occasions Rembrandt had already been obliged to borrow; but the ground of his need for money in 1639 was the purchase of a house. Since his coming to Amsterdam, Rembrandt had removed from the Bloemgracht into the street of the new Doelen, then to the Binnen Amstel to a house

<sup>1</sup> The court, however, considering the injury an insufficient ground of action, non-suited Rembrandt on the 16th July 1638.

VIEW OF OMVAL (1645)



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called the Sugar Refinery. The master desired to have a settled habitation, a house of his own where he could establish his collections and his studios. On the 5th January 1639, Rembrandt purchased a house in the Breestraat, or more strictly in the Joden-Breestraat.

It is not necessary to consult a plan of Amsterdam in order to know that this house must have been in the very midst of the Jewish quarter: the etchings and sketches of this period tell us so, clearly enough; and if in Rembrandt's inventory Callot's works are mentioned by the name of "*Callot's All Jerusalem*," there is a series of drawings and etchings by Rembrandt to which the title would be more appropriate. It was amid these thronged and narrow streets, of doubtful cleanliness—or rather dirtiness—where sordid rags flutter from the windows and the blind alleys are heaped with vegetable refuse that Rembrandt loved to lose himself in his fruitful wanderings. There, even at the present day, may be found the types presented by his etchings; terrible old rabbis, prosperous, bloated diamond merchants, money-lenders with the eyes of birds of prey, workmen emaciated by

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indoor lives and privations, deplorable old women and capricious slips of girls—in the sudden illumination of some fugitive ray of light.

Except for some few familiar friends, such was the company preferred by Rembrandt. He did not frequent high-class society and as Sandrart—who knows everything that Rembrandt does not know—so excellently says: “He *needed only* to have visited Italy and those other places where a knowledge of the antiques and the theory of art can be learned.” Sandrart too informs us that Rembrandt dared to maintain “that one should submit to nature alone and not to other rules”; and the German artist adds, with that learned authority of which his compatriots seem even then to have possessed the secret: “It is certain that if he had managed his affairs more regularly and had conducted himself more discreetly towards the world, he would have considerably increased his possessions. But though he was not a spendthrift, he did not succeed in keeping up his position, and that he associated with people of inferior standing his art bears witness.”

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One cannot indeed improve on this. Rembrandt was soon to learn, to his cost, that he had not the qualities necessary for "keeping up his position" and keeping off "people of inferior standing." In spite of his large gains, in spite of an inheritance from an aunt of Saskia's, and of what came to him at his mother's death in 1640, Rembrandt was only able to pay down one half of the 13,000 florins which was the price of the house in the Breestraat.<sup>1</sup> Nor did Rembrandt ever pay any more of the sum; the unpaid interest mounted up, and the desire of establishing himself became one of the chief causes of his ruin.

<sup>1</sup> This high price shows the value of the building, which dated from 1606.

## VI

The civic guards—The “Mustering of Captain Cocq's Company” called *The Night Watch*—Bad effect produced by this picture—Rembrandt's popularity diminishes—Illness and death of Saskia—Unceasing work—Rembrandt a fore-runner of the romantic school—Rembrandt's son—Hendrickje Stoffels—Rembrandt's prodigality—Bad state of his affairs—Bankruptcy—Rembrandt is turned out of his house—Works of this period—The *Syndics of the Drapers*—Rembrandt settles on the Rozengracht—Constant activity—Masterpieces of this period—Death of Hendrickje—Growing indigence—Rembrandt's death.

IN the seventeenth century all the principal towns of Holland possessed civic guards, or companies of volunteers. These bands of armed citizens had done much for the independence of their country and were very popular. Keen emulation existed between the civic guards of neighbouring towns; there was competition not only in matters of military instruction and accurate shooting, but also in the magnificence of the uniforms and in the wealth of the

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"Doelen" or meeting-places of the various companies. These Doelen were almost always adorned by pictures representing the members of the companies.

A significant convention had arisen in obedience to which these militiamen were depicted seated, glass in hand, round a table: the admirable series of Hals' paintings at Haarlem shows us typical examples of this style. These great collective portraits, moreover, were paid for by contributions settled beforehand, every member represented paying his share. It may easily be imagined that these worthy citizens, having little regard for the exigencies of artistic composition, and having all paid for their own portraits, made a point of seeing themselves presented in a full light and in a becoming manner. This explains the uniform scheme to which Franz Hals confined himself in his pictures. But neither the rules of tradition nor the pretensions of sitters were likely to impress Rembrandt. This was made very plain when the civic guard of Amsterdam, commanded by Captain Banning Coeq, lord of Purmerland, chose the master, then in his full glory, to paint a picture in-



THE LANDSCAPE OF THE "GOLDWEIGHER" (1651)

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tended for the meeting-hall and representing the principal members of the Company.<sup>1</sup>

Rembrandt, in fulfilment of this commission, painted the picture known, it cannot be told exactly why,<sup>2</sup> by the name of *The Night Watch* but universally recognised in Rembrandt's own time as representing merely the arming of the guard. A water-colour, made from the picture in 1655 for Banning Coeq's family, furnishes, moreover, the exact designation of the subject: *The young lord of Purmerland giving to his lieutenant, Master de Vlaerdingen, the order for his troop to march.*

Everyone knows the composition of this great picture upon which Rembrandt probably set to work enthusiastically and without many

•<sup>1</sup> The price fixed was 1600 florins—a sum very much higher than those usually given for such pictures.

<sup>2</sup> May it have been because the picture had become quite black from the effects of tobacco smoke and turf fires, and beneath successive coats of varnish? The picture has now been thoroughly cleaned: the general tone is dark, but the way in which the shadows cast in sunlight are represented should have made any hesitation for ever impossible.

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preliminary studies, for no sketch exists of the whole composition, and the execution was manifestly full of difficulties, corrections and repaintings.<sup>1</sup>

The members of Captain Cocq's company are grouped by the door of a sort of vaulted cellar, and are in the doubtful light which Rembrandt so much liked to paint. We will not hazard a description. Before going to Amsterdam we used to know the picture through having read much about it and seen engravings and photographs. These give no idea of it, or rather give a false idea that one corrects afterwards in one's memory. It is impossible, without having seen it, to imagine the wonderful effect of this great painting in which the richest colours play over the deepest shadows. A strange, disturbing life pulsates through the picture and causes it to be called enigmatical. But try to imagine a score of Rembrandt's portraits on one canvas: do you think the impression would

<sup>1</sup> Some of the persons in this picture were painted without trouble and "came of themselves"; others are absolutely built up of paint—the white-and-gold lieutenant for example.

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not in any case be equally strange, equally enigmatical?

Having to paint portraits of these armed men, Rembrandt composed a picture ; arranged them in a place of his own choice, according to the harmony that seemed to him fitting, and with the addition of such accessories as satisfied his fancy. But he painted the men as he always did, in the light of his own ardour. The picture is very much “composed” (two pieces are now missing<sup>1</sup>). Notwithstanding the careful arrangement of their movements the persons—whatever may have been said on the point—are not “posing.” They are less posed than in any other picture of a corporate body : less than the Van der Helsts in the Ryks Museum ; less than the Franz Halses at Haarlem, where the faces are so full of character but the attitudes so photographically stiff in their pretended ease.

<sup>1</sup> In 1715 the picture was placed between two doors of a hall, and the wall being too small, no better plan was devised than to cut off two strips, removing two persons on the left of the canvas and half of the drum on the right. The copy by Lundens which is in the National Gallery gives an idea of the composition in its entirety.

AGAR TURNED AWAY  
PEN AND WASH DRAWING



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Rembrandt's picture was full of individuality, it broke with routine and traditions, it introduced something new; it displeased. The members of the militia, who had paid to have their portraits and hoped for something plain and visible, with nothing sacrificed, were terribly disappointed. They were accustomed to a precise realism; a dream was shown them. Only the two leaders, well in sight in the foreground, had nothing to complain of—the others were almost all dissatisfied. Perhaps they expostulated? Assuredly Rembrandt did not listen to them, and so put the finishing touch to their ill-will. In order to go down to posterity they had their names inscribed on a shield, that was afterwards painted in at the top of the canvas. But writings of the period show that their disappointment was loud: Rembrandt was reproached with "his unreal shadows, his phantoms, his half-lights," he was called "the prince of darkness" and contrasted with the "brightness" of his pupil Flinck.

Commissions diminished very rapidly. People turned away from the master whose temper was growing more and more independent, who did not listen to remonstrances and who

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amid the serious anxieties that must have been caused by the mortal illness of Saskia—was gloomy and reserved.

As early as 1639 the etchings show us Saskia thin and ill, with a saddened expression. In 1641 she gave birth to a son who was christened Titus in remembrance of Saskia's sister, Titia, who had died a few months previously. But Rembrandt's wife was not destined to recover from her fatigues; her strength was failing rapidly; on the 5th of June 1642 she summoned a notary and dictated her will. She constituted Rembrandt sole legatee, with the duty of educating Titus honourably. She left the whole control of her property to her husband, and begged that the "Orphan Board" would not intervene in his affairs. The use of Titus's fortune was reserved to Rembrandt if he did not marry again. On the 19th of June the young wife was carried to her grave.

Rembrandt immersed himself more than ever in his work, and at this juncture preferred to treat Bible subjects and scenes from the Gospel. He seems also to have been attracted in the early days of his bereavement

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to the tranquillity and peace of the country. A great number of landscapes date from this period. The world was withdrawing from him and he was withdrawing from the world. He sought solitude, and solitude came about him. Work had taken entire possession of him : landscapes, scriptural subjects, rustic scenes, studies of animals, studies from the nude as well as some portraits (among others that of *Elizabeth Bas* of which we have spoken) followed one another without pause. From this period date a *Bathsheba*, the *Holy Family* in the Louvre, the *Woman taken in Adultery*, and later *Susannah and the Elders* (1647), *The Good Samaritan* and the *Disciples at Emmaus* (1648).

The Peace of Westphalia had just been concluded. Holland was in a state of festival, and the rejoicings were commemorated by numerous pictures, but no one thought of calling on Rembrandt for any of them ; success had gone over to his pupil Flinck or to the portrait-painter Van der Helst, who, in his turn, took Rembrandt's place and painted "civic guards." This was probably the time at which Rembrandt produced the monochrom



ABRAHAM SACRIFICING ISAAC  
DRAWING

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known by the name of *The Concord of the Country* (Rotterdam Museum), a crowded composition full, thus early, of a romanticism like that of Delacroix and giving promise already of an admirable and rare picture.<sup>1</sup> It is probable that this large and powerful sketch met with no success and that the picture was not ordered; it was not carried out and remained in the master's studio.

Meanwhile Rembrandt's son was growing up, cared for by a nurse in his father's house. The various portraits that Rembrandt made of him show us a delicate child, with a gentle, dreamy, rather sad gaze that recalls Saskia.

<sup>1</sup> In many points Rembrandt was a pioneer. A very fine *Polish Horseman* (belonging to Count Tarnowski and exhibited at Amsterdam in 1898) shows by its conception and general turn that Rembrandt had felt all the interest of those attempts which were afterwards followed up by latter day French Romanticists. It is a canvas that surprises: a horseman trotting in a melancholy landscape beneath a wide russet-grey sky. The movement of the trotting white horse, the assured air of the horseman riding along, carry our thoughts to Colleone's statue in Venice. We know nothing else resembling it in the works of Rembrandt.

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It is known that at a later time Titus made some few attempts to paint: the inventory of 1656 mentions "a head of *Mary*, a *Book* and *Three little dogs done from nature*" by Titus.

Being entrusted with the child and having considerable responsibility the nurse took, in the nature of things, an important place in the household. But her mind seems soon to have become deranged; Rembrandt had trouble with her, had to place her in an asylum, and to resort to law in regard to money matters. Rembrandt's financial situation was becoming more and more involved. Saskia was no longer at hand to keep things in order, and Rembrandt had none of the qualities that go to make a good accountant. It is in the course of these judicial disputes that we meet for the first time, and in the character of a witness, a young girl of three and twenty, Hendrickje Stoffels, who was in Rembrandt's service and was soon to become his faithful friend.

In the works of this period we find a type of young womanhood of irregular but charming beauty, with a bright, tender expression, and a supple, very finely modelled figure. It is

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she who is the *Woman with Pearls* (1652), the *Bathsheba* of the Louvre (1654), and the *Bather* of the National Gallery: she is Hendrickje Stoffels. Before very long Rembrandt fell in love, in his fashion, with his beautiful model; the presence of the pretty Hendrickje under his own roof led naturally to intimate relations. Hendrickje, in addition to her physical gifts, seems to have been endowed with that gentleness, that domestic calm, that modest, unobtrusive goodwill, which Rembrandt would be particularly likely to value. Hendrickje became his mistress and we know that she was in consequence called before the assembly of her church, by which she was severely admonished and forbidden the communion (23rd July 1654) . . . in the same year she became the mother of a daughter, whom Rembrandt acknowledged and who was christened Cornelia.<sup>1</sup> Up to the end Rembrandt showed great attachment to Hendrickje, and she deserved it. She was a peasant without education (she could not

<sup>1</sup> This was the name of Rembrandt's mother and he had already given it to two daughters of Saskia's, who did not live.



ABRAHAM RECEIVING THE ANGELS (1656)

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write, and signed with a cross), but devoted and full of kindness. She always behaved extremely well to Titus, with whom she lived on good terms. Rembrandt once more had a home, in which he continued his uninterrupted labours.

The house in the Breestraat still exists and one can imagine how Rembrandt divided his time there, between the studio where he painted and that "furnished with tables and presses" (inventory of 1656) wherein he printed his plates. It was now Hendrickje whom he clothed in the luxurious furs that had clothed Saskia, she whom he adorned with her "two large pear-shaped pearls, two rows of valuable pearls, large diamond set in a ring, two other diamonds in eardrops and enamelled bracelets" (deposition on oath of the goldsmith Jan van Loo, made at the request of the trustee of Titus's property in 1659). Heedless of the future the master continued to make fresh purchases, adding to his collections instead of paying off his creditors, borrowing at extravagant rates from the usurers of whom there was no lack in his neighbourhood, and no longer even taking the trouble

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to pay for his house or his taxes. The previous owner grew tired of waiting, and demanded a payment; Rembrandt replied that he would only pay if the title-deeds were handed over to him; but the vendor, getting impatient, obtained an order that he should pay his debt or leave the house. Thus pressed Rembrandt contracted fresh loans, and used them in part for fresh expenses. Ruin became imminent; Saskia's family intervened to protect the interests of Titus, whose name his father had had substituted for his as owner of the house in the Breestraat. The prey was ripe for money dealers and they swooped upon it. A certain Dirck van Cattenburch proposed to Rembrandt an operation for the purchase of another house combined with a money loan repayable in paintings and etchings. Rembrandt tried to escape from his embarrassments by greater activity: the portraits of *Arnold Tholinx*, of the *Geometrician*, the admirable *Anatomy Lesson by Doctor Deyman*, from the remains of which (the picture was partly destroyed in a fire) we divine a work of the first rank; *Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph*, *The Denial of St Peter*, *Pilate washing his hands* and the *St John*

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*preaching* date from this time as well as many etchings.

Among the list of portraits may be noted those (very fine ones) of Jacob Haaring and Franz Bruyningh, one of whom was the administrator and the other the secretary of the "Insolvency Board" . . . these, alas! were sitters appropriate to his situation: creditors were becoming insistent. Rembrandt was declared bankrupt on the 20th of July 1656, and the commissioners of the "Insolvency Board" drew up an inventory "of the paintings, furniture and household effects belonging to the bankruptcy of Rembrandt van Ryn, formerly residing in the Breestraat, near the Saint-Anthonij lock." Rembrandt was removed from his position of guardianship, and it was the young Titus who made it his business to provide, by a will of 1667, for the future of Hendrickje and of his half-sister Cornelia.

The unhappy Rembrandt, harassed by annoyances of every kind, scarcely now found time to work. He did, however, produce the *Adoration of the Magi* (Buckingham Palace), a *Portrait of an Old Man*, and two fine *Portraits of Rabbis* as well as the *Portrait of Titus*, which



THE DEATH OF THE VIRGIN (1639)  
Rk

## REMBRANDT

is in the Wallace Collection. From this time, too, date the admirable portraits of *Rembrandt as an Old Man* [that in the collection of Lord Ilchester (1658) and that in the Louvre (1660)], in which we see the old man, after the buffets of life, with a tired, faded countenance and eyes alarming in their penetration, their clear-sightedness and their melancholy. No more fancy dresses! no more jewels! no more attitudes! - an old man who has suffered, who knows things and people . . . and who knows how to paint as nobody else has painted. He lives now for nothing but his art, and takes no care of his person. Baldinucci tells us that "when he was painting at his easel he had come to wipe his brushes on the hinder portions of his dress."

Turned out of his house; compelled to live from hand to mouth; lodging, to begin with, at an inn and improvising a working place where he could, the old man, whose eyesight was beginning to fail, resumed against his will the rather nomadic life which he had led when he first came to Amsterdam, seeking abode in odd quarters and in the suburbs of the town. In spite of these difficulties and troubles, so

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painful to a man of his age, Rembrandt painted at this time some of his best works: *Christs, Monks*, a *Moses breaking the Tables of the Law*, a *Jacob wrestling with the Angel*, and that admirable *David playing the harp before Saul*<sup>1</sup> in which the master tries that gamut of powerful reds with which he was to attain so marvellous an effect in the *Syndics of the Drapers*. This picture of *David and Saul* is the very expression of the sadness that answers to the call of music. It is a picture that stands alone amid all the "concerts" left by painters of every period. Several other masterpieces first saw the light thus in these chance habitations. In every fresh work the manner of the master becomes ampler, larger, simpler, and more decisive. The same large and masterly treatment is marked in the etchings (*Negress on a Couch*, *Woman before a Stove*, *Woman in a Bath*, *Naked woman with her feet in water*, *Antiope and Jupiter*, etc.) which tell us so plainly of Hendrickje's presence beside the master, and of her constant fidelity in misfortune. In a few hours, in a few assured touches, full of

<sup>1</sup> This picture is now in the museum of the Hague.

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knowledge and thought, Rembrandt gives life to the superb portrait of *Burgomaster Six*, who had remained friendly with him.

A year later, in 1661, Rembrandt fixed his abode in the Rozengracht (Quay of the Roses) in a suburb, and produced masterly canvases one after another. Here it was that he painted the *Saint Matthew* of the Louvre, here that Hendrickje sat to him for the *Venus and Love* (Museum of the Louvre) and for the *Young Woman at the Window* (Museum of Berlin), there too he executed for the Town Hall an immense canvas—the largest that he ever undertook representing the *Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis*.<sup>1</sup> The picture was destined for the Town Hall of Amsterdam, and the commission had originally been given to Flinck. Flinck having died, his master was recollected. Dr. Tulp was at this time filling the post of City Treasurer, and had perhaps remembered the painter to whom he owes it that we know anything about him.

Perhaps it was to his intervention or that of some other friend who had remained faith-

<sup>1</sup> The mutilated remains of this picture are in the Stockholm Museum.

JESUS AND THE WOMAN OF SAMARIA



## REMBRANDT

ful that Rembrandt was indebted for the commission, received a little while afterwards, to paint the collective portrait of the *Syndics of the Drapers*. This time Rembrandt did not attempt to improve the traditional subject by an unexpected treatment. As was customary in these portraits of "governors," the master has contented himself with placing his sitters round a table, busy over the auditing of their accounts. No picturesque accessories: five men dressed uniformly in black, wearing black hats and wide white ruffs round their necks, and a table covered with a red cloth. Such are the elements of this picture so wonderful in its colour and its vitality, of which all reproductions are but pale reflections; and of which the painting is at once sober, full of tone and vivid in colouring beyond almost all other paintings of the master.

The picture of the *Syndics* may be considered as the culmination, the masterly summary, the crown of the artist's whole life of endeavour. There sit the five traders, in their own place, each in a customary and characteristic attitude, quiet, attentive and serious. We can learn to know them, to guess their respective characters.

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We imagine what they were in life. We do not forget them again. The servant standing behind, self-contained but interested in what is going on, helps to give an impression of intimate truth, and to make us say: "Yes—there they are! That is just how it was." Turn your eyes from the picture and look at your neighbour; in him too is the material for a masterpiece. Only a Rembrandt is needed. But are you aware of the world of feelings, the accumulation of labour, the intensity of ardour and power of genius that divide the vision of the master from what we usually call looking and seeing? If you are in any degree a painter, do you at all divine the secret of this harmony which is so rich and so sober, so discreet and so bold, the decision of this thorough and certain *technique*, and do you understand the simplicity of the means employed by this creator?

There is no authority for thinking that the Syndics of the Drapers were particularly well satisfied with their portraits. Rembrandt had gone out of fashion. His contemporaries no longer troubled themselves about him. Since 1660 Hendrickje and Titus together had been

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trading in pictures, curiosities and engravings. Rembrandt guided them by his advice, "as it is indispensable that both should be assisted and helped in this trade, and as no one could be more capable than Rembrandt of doing so" (deed of partnership between Titus and Hendrickje delivered before a notary on the 15th December 1660). In return Hendrickje and Titus advanced 1750 florins to the old master, who undertook to repay it as soon as he could. It seems as if Rembrandt regained a little peace in the house in the Rozengracht. But Hendrickje fell ill, and died about 1663. The portrait of Rembrandt which is in the National Gallery and dates from 1664, shows us the old painter bearing ever deeper marks of age, misfortune and labour, but still anxious as ever to find something new to attempt and to express. The year afterwards the artist painted some other of his finest works (among them the *Jewess Betrothed* of the Ryks Museum) in which the simplification was yet bolder, and probably far more intentional than has been supposed.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is repeated on all hands that Rembrandt's weakened sight obliged him to simplify unduly; this

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In 1665 Rembrandt caused Titus to be declared of age (a year before the legal term), so as to hasten the conclusion of disputes with his creditors. It was at this period that the young painter Aert van Gelder became a pupil of the old master. The latter still painted some admirable portraits, among others the large *Family Portrait* in the Brunswick Museum

seems to us an exaggeration. The picture in the Ryks Museum is the work of a painter who sees perfectly what he is doing. Rembrandt's pictures, generally very full of tone, have in our opinion altered much less than is sometimes said. True, they have a "patina" and look "cooked" under coats of varnish, but their colouring must always have been much *transposed*: that becomes evident when we note the progressive simplifications of colouring that brought Rembrandt to confine himself within those gamuts of amber, tawny, reddish, greenish and bituminous tones which distinguish him. One need not be a great critic to feel what genuine magnificences of colour lurk beneath the seeming discretion of Rembrandt. His pictures do not pale even in the immediate neighbourhood of the greatest colourists, and the "undertones" of the *Good Samaritan*, for example, glow like molten gold.

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(1668) and the *Return of the Prodigal Son* in the Museum of the Hermitage, which is reported to be of incomparable beauty. But Rembrandt no longer even found purchasers for his pictures. "A portrait of him could be bought for *threepence*"! (statement made by Wybrand de Geest, Rembrandt's great-nephew).<sup>1</sup> Titus, who had been married barely a year, died in 1668, leaving his wife *enceinte* of a daughter, who was christened Titia in the month of March 1669.

Rembrandt appeared at the baptism with the child's guardian, but he had not much longer to live. He died in the deepest poverty, leaving nothing but "his clothes of wool and linen and his working instruments." No one among his contemporaries seems even to have mentioned his death. Nothing is found said about it anywhere. Only the register of the Westerkerk has this entry: "Tuesday, 8th October 1669; Rembrandt van Ryn, painter, on the Rozengracht opposite the Doolhof. Leaves two children."

<sup>1</sup> "Cabinet des Statues," 1702.

## VII

General view of Rembrandt's work—Subjects from scripture  
—Originality of Rembrandt in his sacred pictures—His  
way of treating the Gospel.

IN this life of Rembrandt's, the principal pages of which we have just retraced, there is no difficulty in setting forth the dominant idea: that if Rembrandt was a worker of genius, he was possessed by the genius of work. In him all else was subordinate to this unceasing productiveness, this indefatigably creative will. It seems to us an unreasonable thing to consider Rembrandt apart from his work, because the whole man was in it. If the genius of the painter breathes life into the smallest fragments of the work, the work on its part possessed the master. He never parted himself from it. Everywhere, at all times, in good fortune as in ill, in love as in loneliness, Rembrandt constantly carried his work within him, moulding it in his thoughts, adorning it with

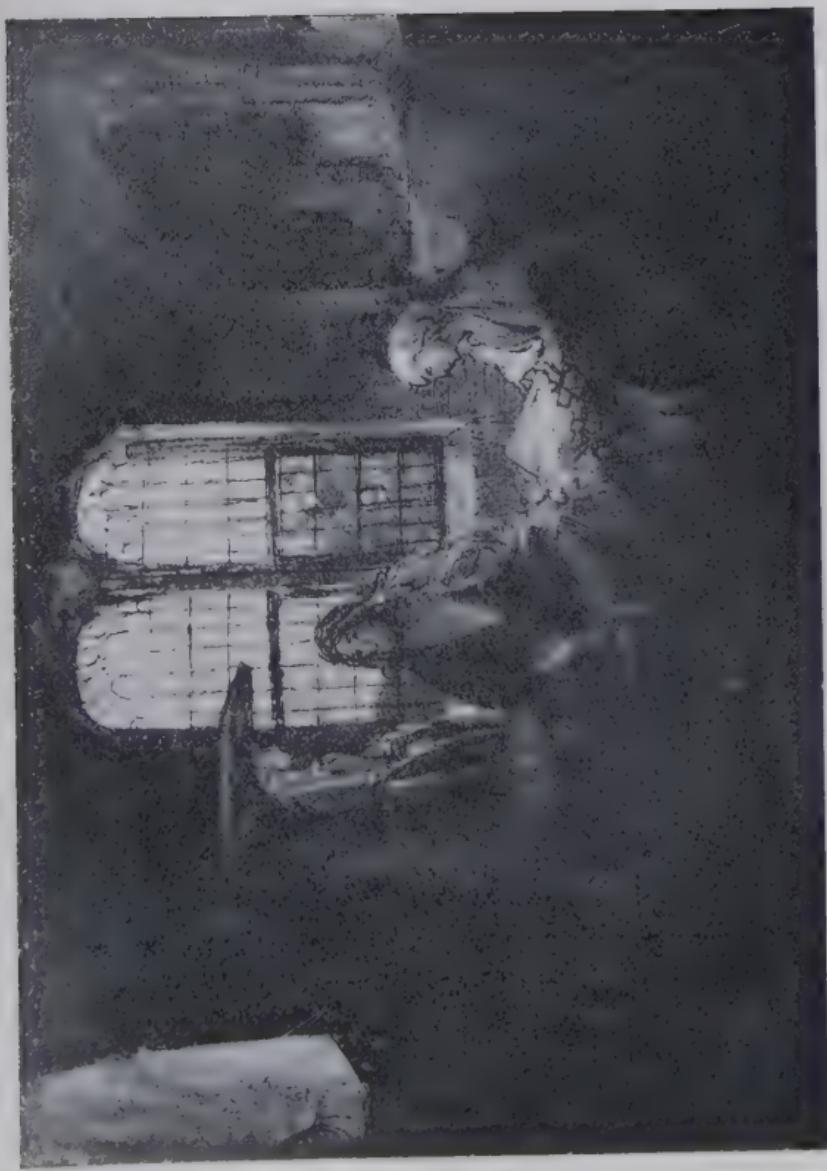
## REMBRANDT

the details that life every moment furnished to him, modifying it according to the ever more fully instructed and ever more certain demands of his mind, and shedding upon it those mysterious rays which he alone perceived, and wherewith he illumined the world. The result of this incessant labour lies under our eyes. It is the work which we must consult if we would form any idea of the man. It is through study of what he has produced that the artist appears to us, with his special physiognomy and characteristics.

As soon as we begin to know Rembrandt his work classifies itself, and we can follow the evolution of his genius with certainty. We almost surprise the secret of that in him which at first seems most mysterious and most impenetrable. The definition given by Napoleon applies marvellously well to the artist. "Inspiration is the instantaneous solution of a long meditated problem." To those who love Rembrandt and who apply themselves to study him in what he has produced, he reveals himself in a manner that grows more and more clear and decisive. We find him, with his fundamental originality, his

JESUS IN THE HOUSE OF MARTHA AND MARY

PEN, WASH AND GOUACHE DRAWING



## REMBRANDT

ever fresh sincerity, his unexpected fancy, his humanity, no less alive in his paintings than in his etchings, in the *Night Watch* no less than in the sketch of a passer by. The very manner in which we have seen that he worked, explains how "all Rembrandt" may be sought and found in very diverse works; he constantly dwelt upon nature, and always interpreted it, imprinting on it his own mark. He never sought far a-field for the subjects—however it might be with the titles—of his pictures; and even as he took, so to speak, no part in the "history" of his time, so he never painted what is conventionally called a "historical picture," save that strange and surprising sketch of *The Concord of the Country* of which we have spoken already. His other "historical" and "mythological" pictures are so remote from special times and countries, so human under their often grotesque disguises, that there is a difficulty in agreeing about their titles, and hesitations have existed between *Danae* and *Sarah*, between the *Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* and the *Conspiracy of John Ziska*, between *Flora* and the *Betrothed Jewess*, etc.

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It was around him and within him that Rembrandt sought the subjects of his pictures ; it is always his soul that he shows us, whether he gives voice to an eternal language through the features of his countrymen, or calls up a quiet corner of Holland with its infinite distances ; or puts on canvas a stormy landscape where the same gust twists the trees, rolls up the scrolls of cloud, lays the light flat on the earth and sets nature trembling at the flying passage of a thought ; or whether he embodies his pity, his tenderness, his anger, everything in him that is most deeply human, and paints or engraves scenes from the Bible.

The Old Testament and the New, the two books which have been the spiritual food of so many generations of men, furnished Rembrandt with inexhaustible and living material. Their eternally human element was well calculated to attract him, and from the beginning of his career to the end, Rembrandt did not cease from seeking in them subjects into which he could translate the feelings animating him. At first — notwithstanding that pursuit of the vital, which we have noted — the picturesque details and a certain sham orientalism are a

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little irritating. But here, as in the rest of his work, the master continued to tend towards simplicity and depth. There is the same advance—no less in manual skill than in the depth of feeling expressed—from the *Money Changer* (1627) to the *Syndics* (1661), as between the *Presentation in the Temple* or the *St Paul in Prison* (about 1627), and the *Good Samaritan* (1648) or the *Saint Matthew* of the Louvre (1661). Similar differences divide the *Baptism of the Eunuch* (1631) or the *Saint Jerome* of the same year from the *Disciples at Emmaus* (1648); and the *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp* (1632) from that of *Dr Deyman* (1656).

The feeling, the sincerity, the “naturalness” of his scriptural pictures are so marked in Rembrandt that it seems, indeed, quite “natural” that this wonderful portrait-painter should have sought for subjects in the Bible. But if we think of what other artists of all times have made of the sacred subjects which they have treated, we shall feel, much more clearly than by means of any long analysis, the unique quality of the Dutch master. Like Rembrandt, Velasquez was a painter of still life and of living portraits: his sacred pictures

THE TAKING DOWN FROM THE CROSS  
WASH AND GOUACHE DRAWING



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are brilliant "bits" of studio work, admirable "studies" of nude or draped figures, to delight the eye and to bear witness that Velasquez was neither a thinker nor a dreamer. The compositions of the Italian masters show us the pagan ideal, the immortal antique beauty living on in these souls that blossomed in sunny lands.

"L'âme antique était rude et vain<sup>1</sup>  
Et ne voyait dans la douleur  
Que l'acuité de la peine,  
Ou l'étonnement du malheur."

The "gentle" virgins of Raphael are, before all things, calm, sane, untroubled and out of reach; this is why their tenderness, however sincere, may appear affected, not to say indifferent. Titian and Veronese show us full-blown Venetian women, better suited for gondola-parties than for the sufferings of the Passion. Vinci evokes the enchantresses wearing the impenetrable, immutable, fluctuating

<sup>1</sup> "Rude souls of yore, and vain,  
In sorrow did but know  
The sharpness of the pain,  
The terror of the woe."

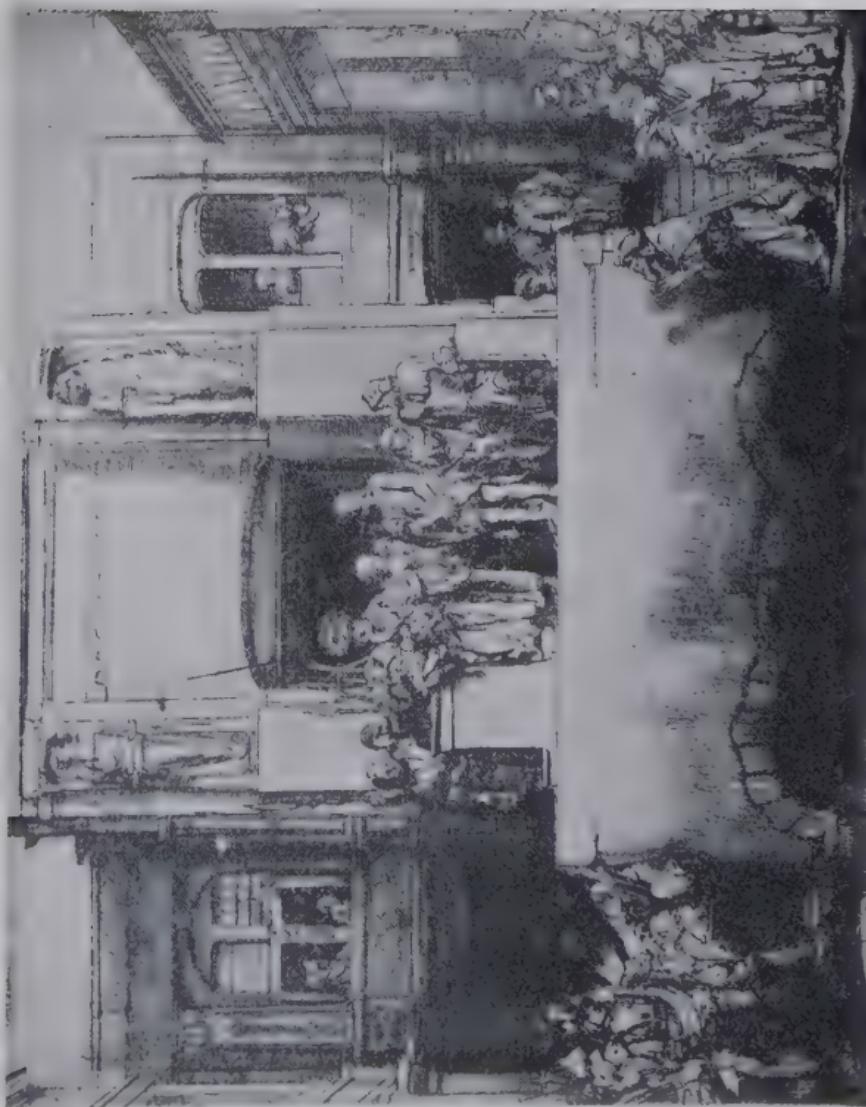
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smile which haunted his dreams. Borgognone makes us love his candid little maidens. The *Holy Women* of Mantegna weep aloud; their mouths, so beautiful in their distortion of sadness, and their tragic grimaces make us think, despite ourselves, of the masks of tragedy: they lament in Latin. They are unconscious prisoners of style. Fra Angelico shows us the Catholic joys reserved for the martyrs and teaches us that Paradise resembles Florence in spring-time, just as Botticelli and Ghirlandaio disclose that the saints were customers of the goldsmiths on the Ponte Vecchio. Even Giotto himself, in all the power of his religious frescoes, plunges his roots down through Byzantium into pagan antiquity.

Through the mirage of Italy ancient tradition influenced the painters of the north. German as was Dürer, he too remembered his travels, and so did all the Flemings from Van Eyck to Rubens: it was not within themselves that these painters sought the face of Christ; it was not their own flesh that they felt palpitate on the cross, nor their own tears that were shed by the Virgins whom they painted.



CHRIST SHOWN TO THE PEOPLE (1655)



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Their very piety, the form of their creed held them off, if only in respect; the Son of Man was always a God for them, when He was not an athlete.

And now, consider the work of Rembrandt, turn over this series of etchings where the most individual and intangible art has peopled the plates with faces that are the very expression of the pity, suffering, moral beauty and infinite gentleness of the New Testament. See how fully the very spirit of the old Bible is present even in the oddest of these compositions, and how much of the truly "biblical" there is even in the strange etching where Abraham is entertaining bearded angels! Must it not have been thus that (see p. 137) Abraham was grasping his son at the moment when the angel stopped his arm? And does not this terrible drawing call up the time when savage Israel trembled before a fierce and jealous Lord? Follow in the course of Rembrandt's life the successive images of Christ from the child whose wisdom baffled the learned men, to the bruised and tortured victim taken down from the cross. Feel the whole sum of goodness, pity and suffering that

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Rembrandt has succeeded in putting into the few lines that make the face of Christ. And when you have been touched by all that can be expressed in the image of a man standing with bound hands and brows raised a little above resigned eyes, see how much, by the mere suppression of the crowd in the foreground, the final state of the plate, *Christ presented to the People*, becomes more tragic than the first conception.

Do the same thing with the pictures. Note how intensity of feeling yet never draws Rembrandt away into "literature," how his pictures are always and above all paintings, and not treatises on morals or symbolical theology. We have a letter of Rembrandt's in which he begs Huygens to take care that the pictures of the *Entombment* and the *Resurrection* "which he has finished with much study and zeal and in which he has exerted himself to put the utmost nature and action" may be "exhibited in a very strong light so that they may be seen from a distance, for they will look better thus" (January 1639). We recognise the same man who said later on, when he was irritated by connoisseurs coming too near one

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of his pictures in order to discuss the "technique" and the "touch": "Do not sniff at oil-paint; it is very unhealthy." His first and constant pre-occupation is the work as a whole, taken in conjunction with the principal feeling to be expressed. This does not prevent his pictures (quite the reverse) from being interesting viewed at close quarters and in detail; but this quality of unity —the most precious of all in a painter's eyes renders impossible and deceptive the task of the writer who seeks to describe in words that succeed one another an impression that is instantaneous and dominant. Drawings like *Christ in the house of Martha and Mary*, the *Descent from the Cross*; etchings like the *Hundred-florin-piece*, the *Death of the Virgin*, *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*, etc.; pictures like the *Good Samaritan* or the *Pilgrims at Emmaus* of the Louvre, are not to be described. They must be seen in order to appreciate the master who, out of his infinite pity, could raise up so many suffering beings, and who has painted the Gospel as we imagine that Jesus spoke it.







